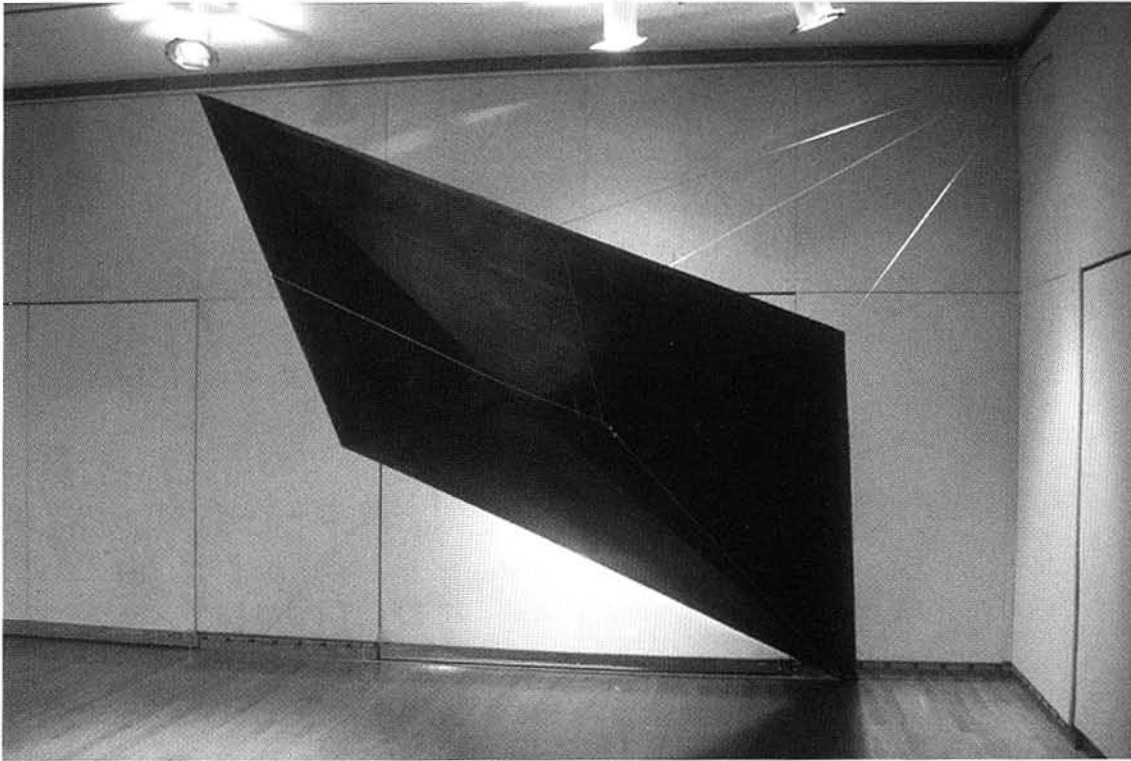


# Inscribe

TORBEN BERNS, DAN MAXFIELD, TSZ YAN NG



## INSCRIBE

4.17.00 - 4.22.00 OPENING RECEPTION 4.17.00 6:30 PM

HARTELL GALLERY, SIBLEY DOME  
ITHACA NY 14853  
OPEN MON-FRI 9AM-5PM

"INSCRIBE" WAS AN INSTALLATION MADE POSSIBLE WITH GRANTS FROM THE CORNELL COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS AND THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE

The following is a reflection on an installation presented in the Hartell Gallery before the gallery's renovation. The work was installed for five days, during which time the gallery remained bathed only in a television blue light. An explanation of the work, offered in 12pt text on a sheet of 8.5 x 11 paper, hung on the wall adjacent to the Dean's office and consisted of the following two paragraphs:

FIGURE 1  
Object 1 - Kite Construction

The gallery, with its symmetrical layout—a loaded passage connecting two disciplines—hinged about the strategic position of the Dean's office, lends itself most appropriately to an investigation of perspective and the ground which precedes perspective's authority.

To inscribe is to mark permanently—a writing in—of a presence or order. The inscribing is an act predicated upon the continuity of time located in memory. The project itself is a cube inscribed upon a virtual plane created by the mirroring of two views. The views, specific to the element of passage and perspective, are provided by the windows of the gallery. The pieces in the gallery are purely sections through the cone of vision. The cube belongs to memory and its inscription within the imaginative—i.e. actual—realm.

What follows, then, is a recounting of the installation in which photographs, words, and reflections are constructed so as to allow an absent spectator to enter a very specific ground of objectivity: the ground presented by a work. The reader will grant that the voice of the narrator, which is not to be confused with an omniscient view, the ground of objectivity itself,

FIGURES 2 AND 3  
Kite Construction

or even that of the authors of the original work, serves only as an advocate of a position offered for consensus.

To inscribe, we are told, is to write permanently. What is inscribed is one system of representation that points plainly to another—so much so that one is permitted to forget the presence of the first. Nonetheless, both are merely systems: the first, that of writing; the second, that of naming. Nowhere is the “thing” alluded to present without mediation. What, then, is actually inscribed as being permanent? How should we approach such integral qualities of “actual objects” such as “embodied experience,” objectivity, actuality (and its corollary, virtuality), if the very “thing” slips like a hologram before our eyes?

We are reminded of Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*: two systems of representation, neither one a pipe. So

what is the painting about, except “not-pipes”? We can similarly consider *Las Maninas* in which Velázquez doubly problematizes the “proper subject of the painting.” After all, is it not about the king and queen for whom the scene exists and from whose existence all meaning and order emanate?

This is not just metaphorical. The royal couple are reflected in the painted device of the “mirror,” an object identifiable as such—as opposed to a painted painting—because of the light (divine) entering from the side and from which the mirror shines in contrast to the other paintings around it.

Of course it is possible, in principle, by virtue of the technique of perspective, for all viewers of the painting to “occupy” the positions of the king and queen. In that case, we might be led to believe that perspective, or technique, wrests power from the divine and places it

in the hands of the most ordinary mortals. This would follow from the fact that we, too, can occupy the sovereign’s position simply by understanding the privilege of the station point that mirrors the vanishing point. But if that is the case, by the same logic, all of us are subjugated together. The “subject” of the painting—i.e., the “free, modern predicating subject which acts into the future”—is not you, me, or the king, but in fact is returned to being the “ruler’s subject,” where now the ruler is the technique rather than the king. The sovereign human, too, is summarily subjugated. Why, then, would Velázquez have been knighted for his loyalty as well as his genius?

The painting, and Velázquez’s problematization of the subject, are not so simple. For as one meditates on the perspective itself, one realizes that the picture plane—in this case an additional mirror used to construct the scene—of the painter’s view lies between the painter



and the position occupied in principle by the king and queen. In other words, the painting, to include the reflected royal couple, is itself an impossible situation. So what, then, is the actual subject of the painting? Foucault answers that it becomes self-referential as a system of representation. In other words, at the moment one realizes the constructed nature of the painting, it is not about the world alluded to by the painting, but the means of constructing that world itself.

Perspective, or, more accurately, "artificial perspective" is a means of constructing the world by conceiving it in terms of a geometric representation. The image, then, is a section through the cone of vision. Understanding this alone, we grasp the constructed nature of the system, but are we satisfied with the subject of *Las Maninas*? We are still left with an impossible representation that makes perfect sense. Granting that we are aware of the artifice, the painting introduces another mechanism that is not reducible to the nature of perspective but reveals the nature of something else. Perspective works precisely because it allows us to occupy a position "in principle"—i.e., virtually. We understand it because the space presented is easily accommodated within the view of the world that we occupy at that moment. That these two moments are in fact contradictory—i.e., that each denies the specificity or privilege of the other—and that this is not a problem, is best evidenced in our willingness to accept the interchangeability of things in one system for things in another. We are as willing to flip between an understanding of words for things, pictures for things, and even objects as "things" as much as we are willing to flip between our "particular" view and the view of "another," and still not encounter a crisis. This is a process of being which, when confronted, inevitably results in deferral: the representation of one system in terms of another in order to create the possibility of a moment—"time."

To put this another way with respect to a human being, in order for being—or duration—to appear, being / duration must be located within time itself. Hence "duration," or objectivity, is a function of time; or again: objectivity is a function of multiple points of view. Without the possibility of such "virtual" maneuvering, we could not posit a future in which to

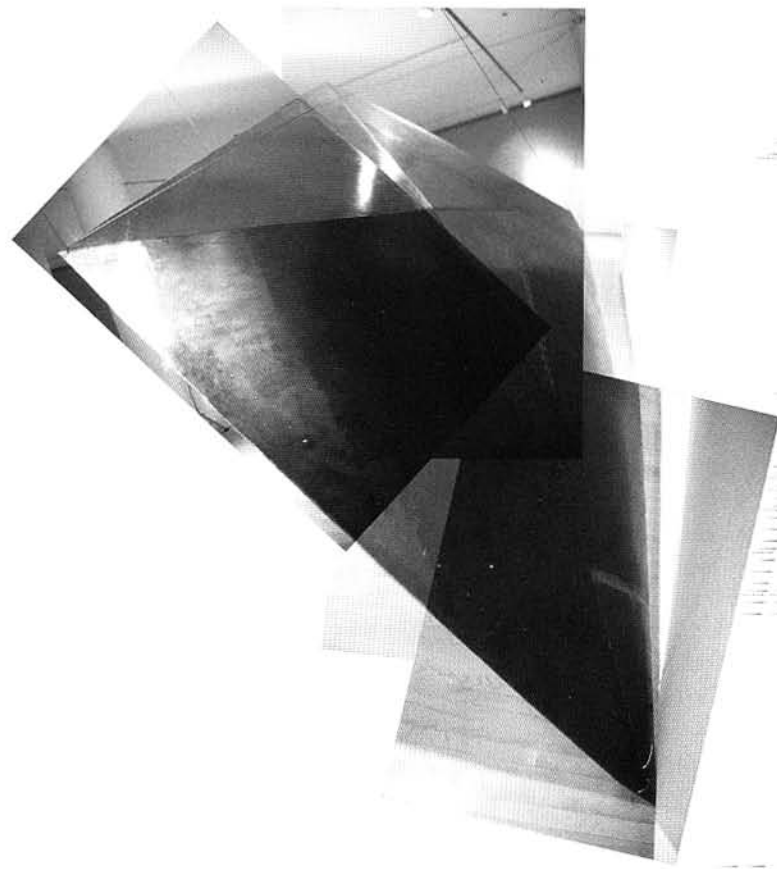


FIGURE 4  
Kite Construction - back view

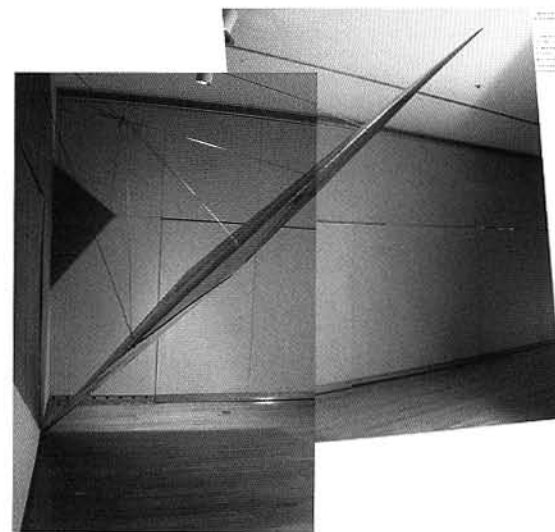
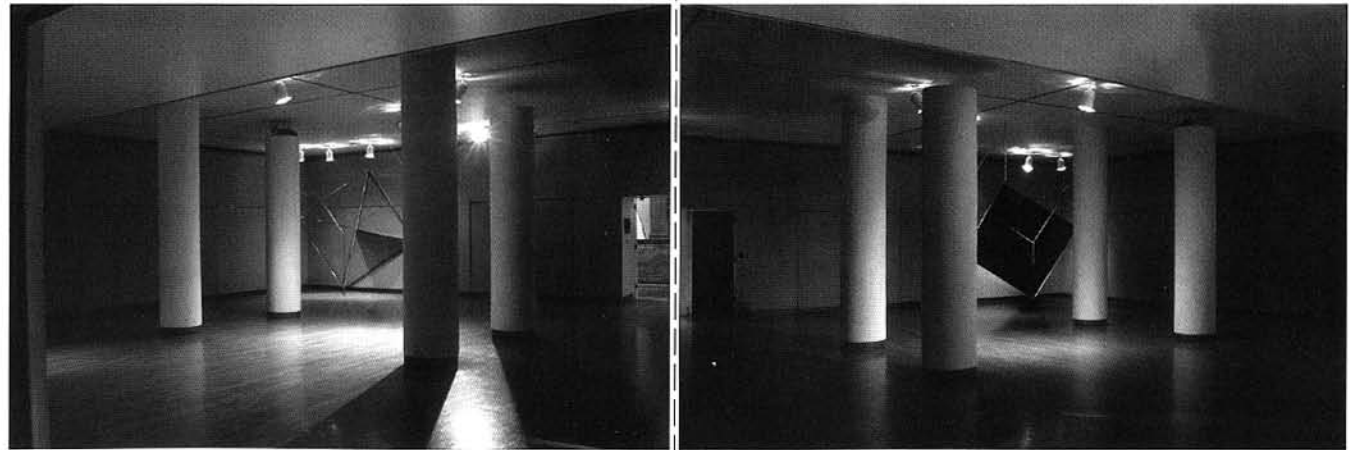
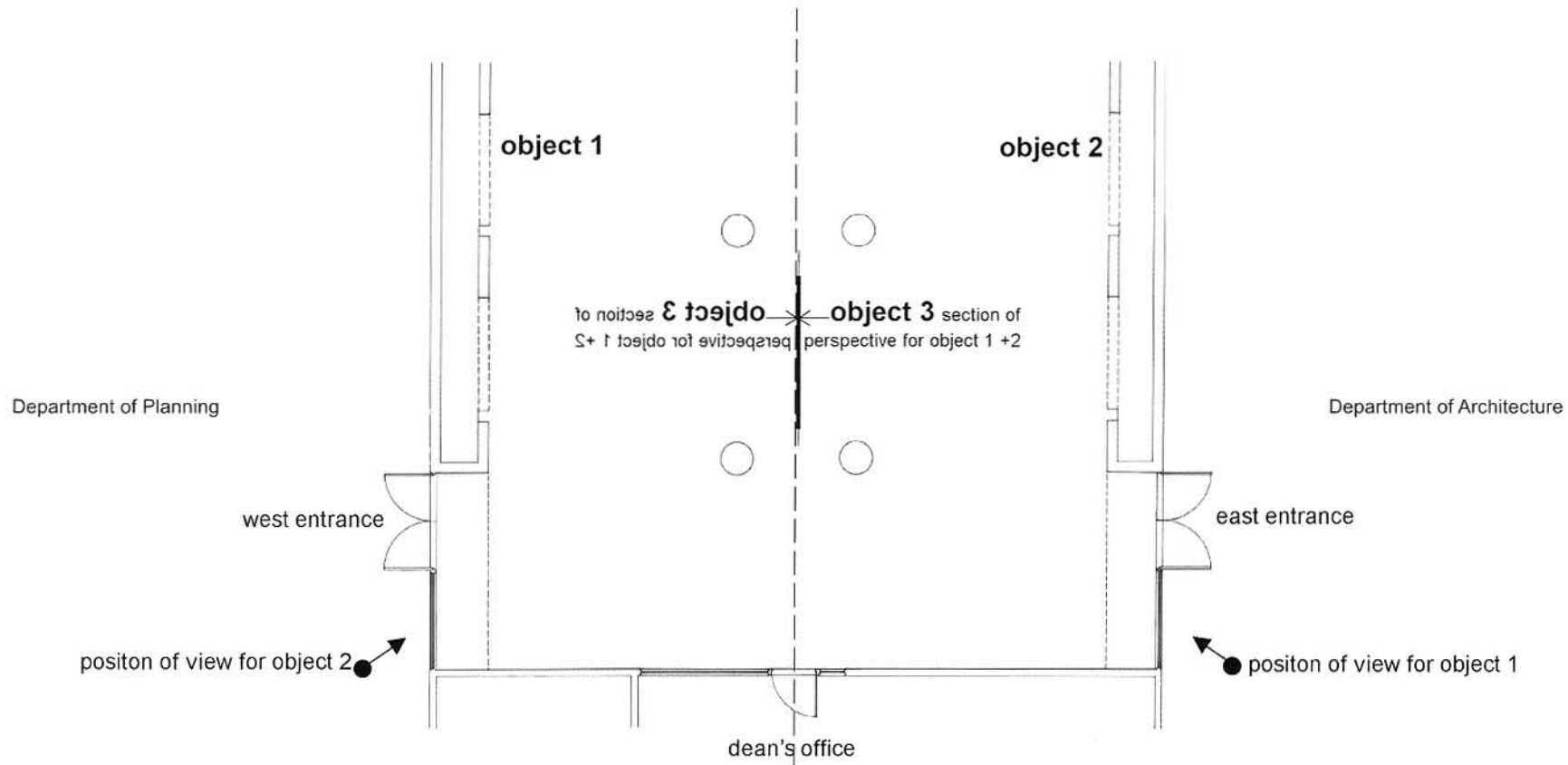


FIGURE 5  
Kite Construction - side view

**FIGURE 6**  
Hartell Gallery plan with installation  
diagram and views



object 2 as viewed through window outside of gallery (west entrance) | object 1 as viewed through window outside of gallery (east entrance)

act. By the same token, one is endlessly deferring an implicit reckoning; understanding all moments simultaneously. In other words, implicit in all human beings is an atemporal perspective from which all points are visible simultaneously. We can logically conceive of this point, but obviously never "bodily" occupy it. It is, as Kant remarked, a scandal of reason.

One has to note that integral to this entire description is "time." Velázquez's contemporaries were not so convinced of the connection between time and representation, yet we can never seem to escape it. Velázquez (and this is what makes him so modern) represents "time," yet does so by constructing the concept rather than attempting to represent it in discrete (spatial) moments (even à la "cubism" or *Nude descending stair*). Further, he does it precisely through perspective, which by definition (as a section through the cone of vision) is nothing but one of many discrete moments. We see in this, then, the very issue that would lead Duchamp to abandon retinal art (and turn away from *Nude descending stair*), and concern himself entirely with the a / temporal presentation of "given being."

Let us return to the project installed in Hartell. Given the prelude so far, we can see that the project is an attempt to investigate perspective, and, more important, with an eye to understanding the role of memory (time) that is prior to both the authority of perspective and the authority of the object.

Perspective assumes one has one's eye nailed to the end of a pointed stick—at least if one is granting a particular moment a status different, or even superior to, any other moment. This occurs either by "representing" that moment (negating it permanently in space) or using that moment towards some future end (representing it within a process of continuing negation). One may draw attention to this fact of differently accorded status by succinctly constructing one view as meaningful and all others as "meaningless." One need only imagine a Baroque use of perspectival illusion to understand this concept. As we have already pointed out, this would understand perspective only in terms of position or space, and not confront its temporal aspect (if only because human history is still irrelevant for the Baroque worldview).

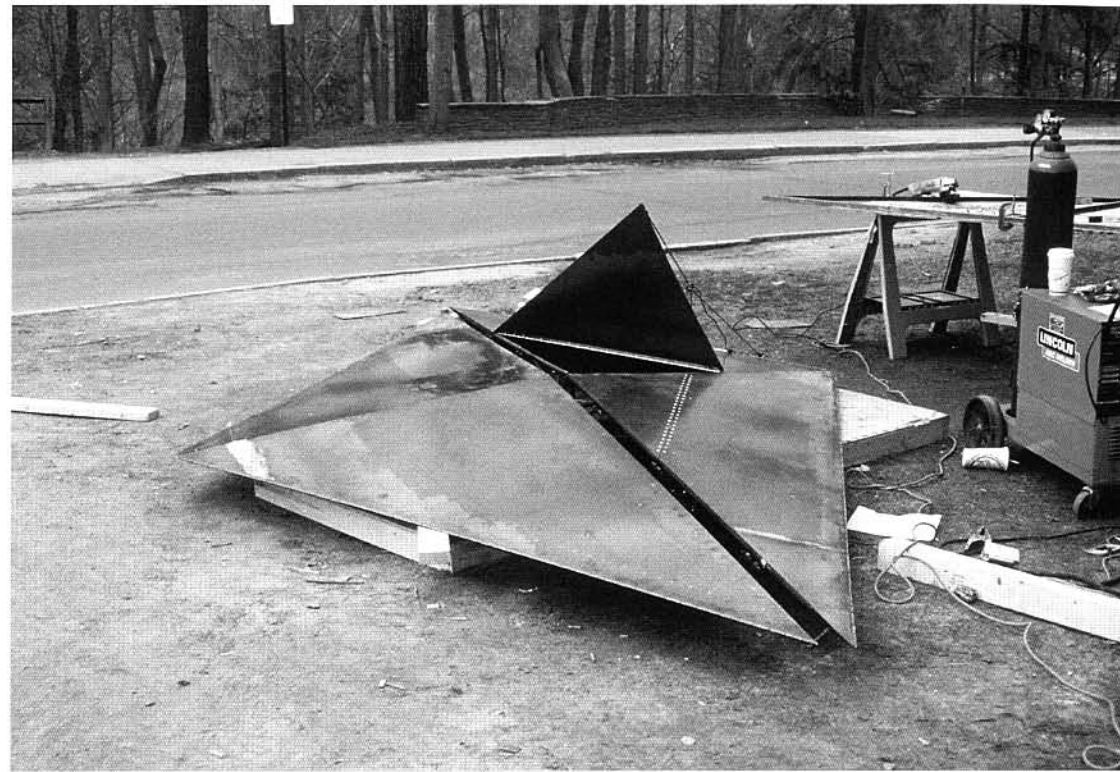


FIGURE 7  
Kite Construction

The Baroque invests its emphasis in perspective's spatial authority in revealing a geometric world that is seen to prevail over the transient vicissitudes of human time. We, of course, with our belief in history, assume precisely the opposite. That belief notwithstanding, one cannot pretend to engage art merely as illusion, since it would barely rise above technical wizardry and in the final analysis appear inauthentic if not inconsequential. What we wished to accomplish, then, was to provide a clarity of differentiation, the point of which was not perspective as illusion but the very temporal conditions for the appearance of meaning that precede perspective.

As can be seen in the accompanying images, the construction of the installation consists of three objects placed within the gallery. The relation of each of these objects to the others is given by the gallery itself with

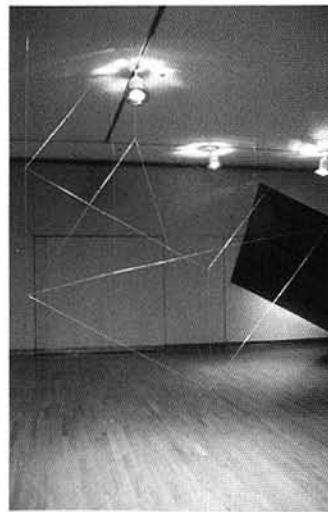
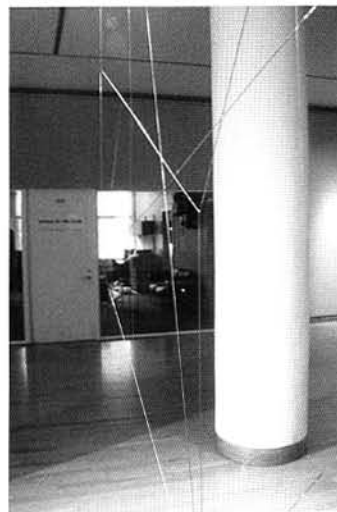
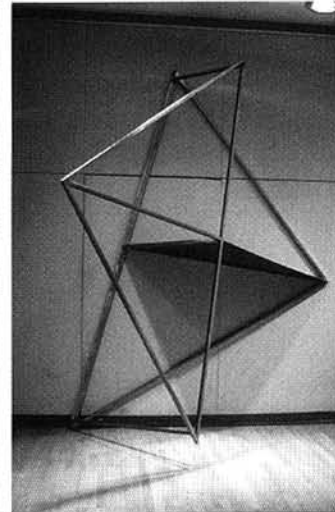
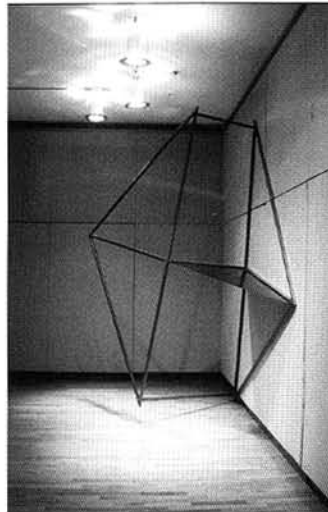
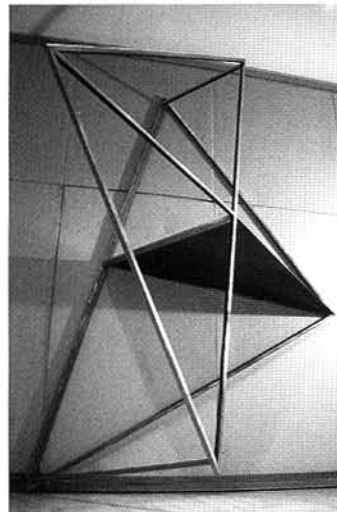
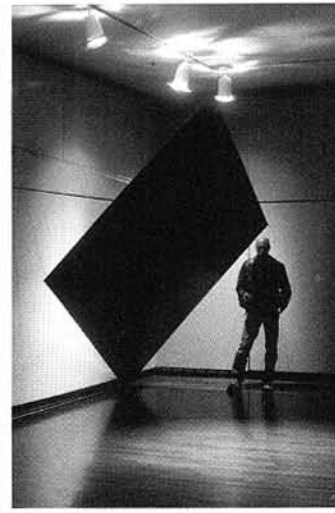
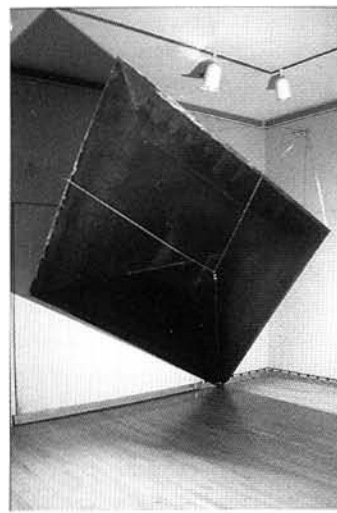
its inside and its outside—halls delineating the respective wings of Planning and Architecture—and then the traversing view which connects inside and out as afforded by the large windows. The latter are mirrored symmetrically next to the entrances that are also similarly mirrored. The existence of the objects themselves would bear no relation to one another by virtue of simply being inside the same space. No part reflects any other as the symmetry of the gallery might suggest. Rather, precisely in the same way that one might experience the passage in time through the gallery from the outside to the inside and back out, does the independence of these objects yield to dependent relations among them and give credence to the authority of the perspective of their appearance.

Given the two views into the gallery permitted by the large windows, we can identify a planner's "view" and

FIGURES 8, 9, 10 (TOP)  
Object 1 - Kite Construction

FIGURES 11, 12, 13 (MIDDLE)  
Object 2 - Frame Construction

FIGURES 14, 15, 16 (BOTTOM)  
Object 3 - Wire Construction



an architect's "view" from their position outside of the respective gallery windows. We could just as well identify the views as West and East respectively, but the minute one realizes that the third "view" belongs to an "insider"—an inside view: Dean, planner, architect, spectator—the ground of terms is immediately loaded in terms of "whose view." Each view is hidden from the other by virtue of where they are placed within the gallery. So if one were to look inside the gallery through the window from the architecture wing, then one would see a view with an object intended for that view, and the object intended for the view from the other window is indeed hidden. Of course, the setup of the installation does privilege a specific point from which a particular perspective is to make sense—the proverbial pointed stick—but the isolation of that view, understood from that position alone, reinforces the object's apparent autonomy and leaves each perspective and its consequent spatial experience split. The only way to make the connection between the objects is to now see these objects from the inside. Of course, by simply leaving that privileged position outside the gallery, the object ceases to be what we had originally perceived it to be. Or does it?

To repeat, the views are tableaux, in that the picture windows frame the view in such a way as to emphasize the recognition of the perspective of the object in question. This indeed leads to surmising the privileged station point. Sure enough, the object on view appears to be a proper cube. Furthermore, the architects and the planners indeed see identical cubes. However, they see only their cube since the cube visible to the opposing view is hidden by virtue of the limiting function of the framed view. What, then, is the series of events inside the gallery that will necessitate the recall of that view from that privileged position, be it the architect's side or the planner's side? And how do we recall this view? Perhaps by memory. But a memory of which view? A cube in axonometric view? A cube that exists nowhere once we are out of that privileged position? And what of that cube in axonometric view? Where does it exist? And does the object for that privileged position have six sides that measure equally from any direction— $x$ ,  $y$ , or  $z$ ?

To answer that question requires one to enter the gallery, and in doing so discover the third object.

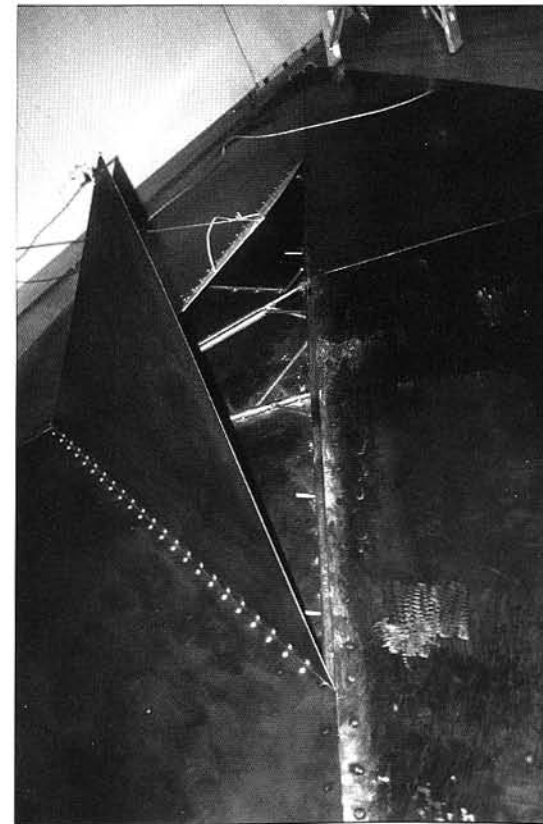
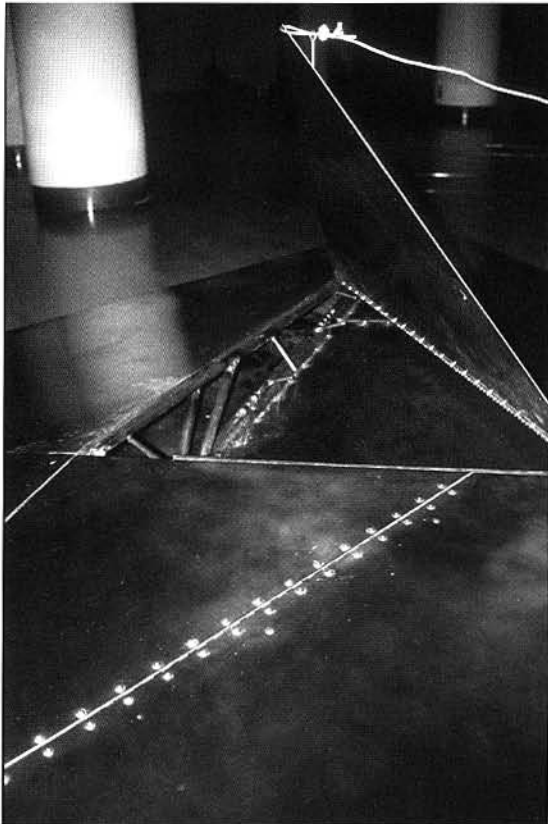
Perhaps it went unnoticed from the view outside the window (curiously, regardless from which side, the planners' or the architects'), since it aligns perfectly with the object seen from that special privileged point. One may need even to confirm that alignment by exiting the gallery where one entered and seeing with one's own eyes that particular view again from the window. Closer investigation reveals this third object to bisect the gallery along its line of symmetry. And since it does align with the original object, perhaps this plane, perfectly bisecting the gallery, is in fact a picture plane of the original perspective—an actualized picture plane that is indeed the cube in axonometric form. But is it? If one is perpendicular to this picture plane, the object that is supposed to be the cube in axonometric seems skewed or deformed. And then looking at it from the door to the Dean's office—incidentally, along the axis of symmetry of the gallery—this object is no more than a line in space, a vertical line that is the object itself.<sup>1</sup> It is with an understanding that this

object is indeed the picture plane that one can now focus on all the objects now in view within the gallery, including the one intended for the other window at the other side of the gallery but that was hidden when we first encountered a "privileged" position.

It occurs to one to wonder whether this object that we call a picture plane aligns with the object for the other window. And indeed, if one were to exit the gallery at the other side and look back through the window, the picture plane would align with the object in the corresponding far corner, with the first object completely out of view from this position. We now know that this second privileged position on the opposite side from the original position also affords a view of a cube in axonometric without our exiting to confirm this. That this cube is the same as the one on the other side is guaranteed by the picture plane. It is indeed the element that allows one to make the connection between all the objects in this space inside and out.

The variations on how a spectator may arrive at this line of questioning and understanding are infinite. There are as many possible characteristics to the gallery, the departmental hierarchy, or the installation itself to begin the process of ascribing meaning as there are spectators to the project. Similar variations of lines of speculation may arise. For instance, if one were to notice the picture plane with the object aligned and be able to consider the symmetry of the gallery, one could make an educated guess as to what the view from the other window might be. Or one might see from inside the gallery two disparate objects at the far corners opposite each other (without noticing the picture plane), and see that one object is intended for one framed window view and the other for its opposite framed window view. But inevitably a circular process is initiated and we are eventually caught in the act of recalling by virtue of what we remember from a moment before: in this case, the appearance of a cube in axonometric.

FIGURES 17, 18, 19  
Interior details of Kite Construction



While there are no cubes in the gallery, we are made to recall that the cube exists at privileged position(s).

The question, then, that we would wish to pose is the precise nature of the object. If we recall the process of deferral alluded to above by which an object normally gains its authority, it would be through the agreement of the nature of the object presented by any viewpoint. What we call "objective" (another word for "lens") is a function of consensus: a political characteristic ascribed to that which can be agreed upon and stand for multiple points of view, or multiple perspectives. The possibility of duration, or being, is that which withstands time, yet is granted that status by time itself.

What we call objects, and what we call objective (that which can be measured and therefore stand in agreement), is not prior to some subjective view but in fact the very multiplicity of views with which the object gains solidity as a locus in time.

Whenever we encounter an object, what grants it its duration is the fact that we can virtually maneuver around it and arrive at an understanding that endures. At no time do we ever occupy that Archimedian view that would grant all views. Nor do we need to. It is sufficient to initiate the process of deferral whereby "this view" may not equal "that view," but this object is that object. (The cube I see is the cube you see, although I have never seen a cube in every side of its entirety at the same time.)

The cubes in the gallery offer no less an objective ground. Only the terms shift. Rather than saying "this is that," where there is no identity but identity is assumed in order to establish possibility, the constructed cubes are saying "this is this," where the identity is a logical construct of two views and a shared picture plane. As the spectator, I am as acutely aware of the lack of the named object as I am of the process of time and imagination required to lend that name authority.

Apparently the authority of the "object" does stem from perception, but perception is itself a political construct. It entertains multiple points of view and this, in itself, takes time.

