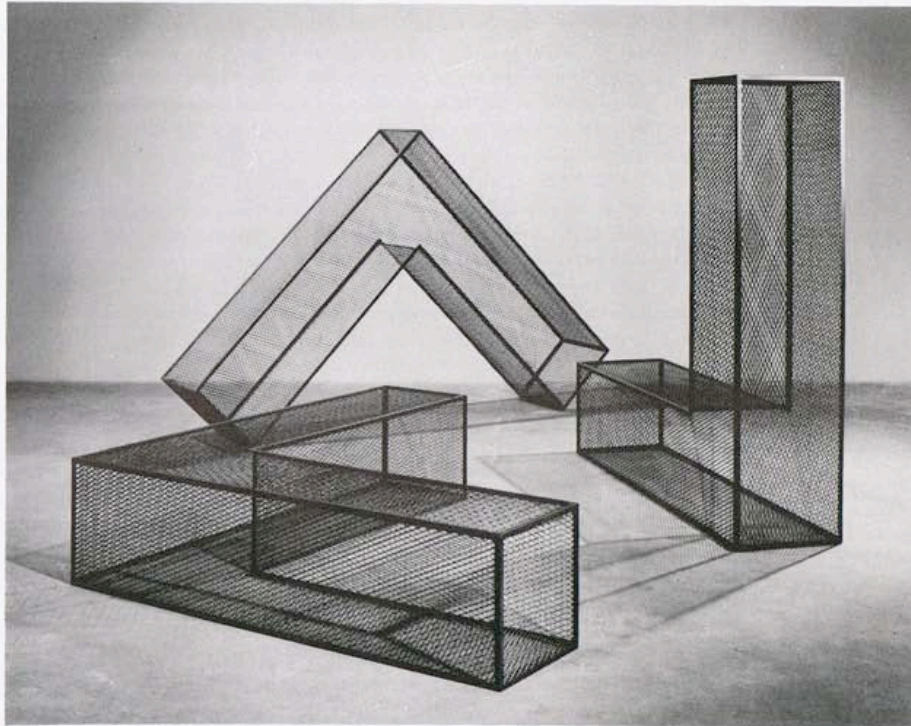


MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

812 n. robertson boulevard los angeles 90069

Yard, Sally. *Robert Morris: Selected Work 1961-1988* (exhibition brochure). Los Angeles: Margo Leavin Gallery, 1989.

R O B E R T M O R R I S



S e l e c t e d   W o r k   1 9 6 1 - 1 9 8 8

7   J a n u a r y - 1 1   F e b r u a r y   1 9 8 9

M A R G O   L E A V I N   G A L L E R Y

812 North Robertson Boulevard • 817 North Hilldale Avenue Los Angeles 90069 213 273-0603 fax 213 273-9131

310 273 0603 fax 310 273 9131

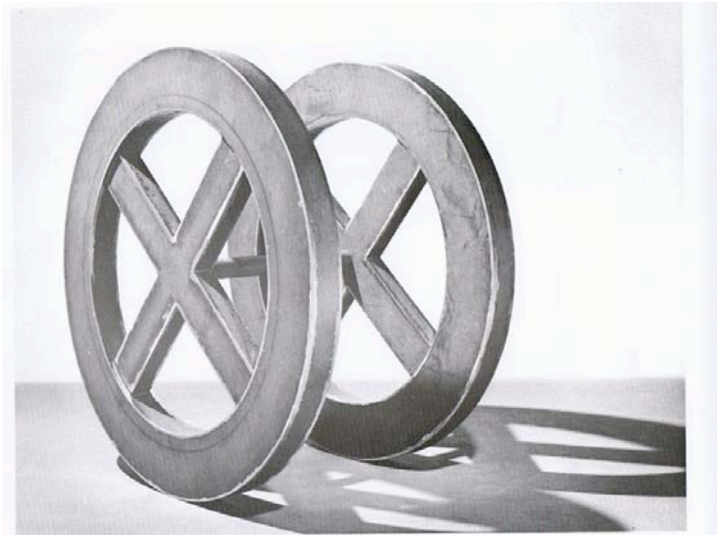
Two footprints, one complete, one partial as it apparently strides into the lead space of a 1964 relief by Robert Morris are paired with two 2-foot rulers of different lengths. In a punning Duchampian play on the notion of measure, Morris invokes the anatomical, self-referential basis on which we measure the world. In his immaculately fabricated “Minimal” cubes, columns, slabs, and extended circles of the same decade, Morris took this notion off the wall, his forms suspended from the ceiling, projecting across corners, joining walls and floor, sitting on the floor, occupying the same space as we do. The tragic human content of Morris’s reliefs of the eighties seems a baroque barrage after the irony of the cast lead pieces and the economy of the Minimal works. Yet from the phenomenological probings of the sixties onward, Morris has been unflinching in his fundamental pursuit—to comprehend our place in the universe.

The ironic tenor of the sixties no doubt derived in part from the impression that, as Alain Robbe-Grillet put it, “Man looks at the world and the world does not look back at him.”<sup>1</sup> Morris’s Minimal works, for all their apparent neutrality, were covertly allusive. “Those gray columns and slabs I copied directly from photographs of the ruins of the King Zoser complex at Saqqara, Egypt.”<sup>2</sup> But the classical, Minimal forms seemed purified of any evocation of the erosion of human design embodied in the ruins of a funerary architecture. Clarity of even the simplest of forms was subverted. The mirrored cubes installed at Green Gallery in 1965 seemed apparitions. Beguilingly simple at first glance, the *Battered Cubes* reveal their slight skew to be a geometric not a perceptual warp—they are truncated pyramids. “An object has no stable perceptual place or size or relation to other objects. For these are a function of our own positions as perceivers . . .”<sup>3</sup> There is finally no all-seeing perspective which encompasses the multiplicity of vantage points through which we piece together an image of the world.

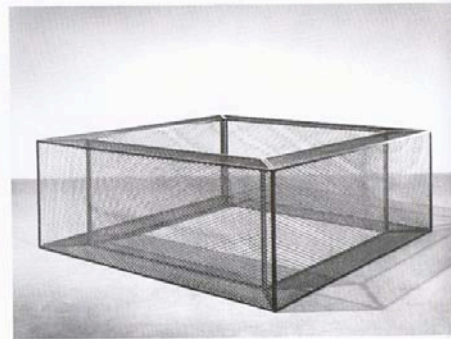
In the sixties Morris rebuffed the “diagrammatic”<sup>4</sup> overlay of perspectives refracted in the intellectual space of Cubism, creating instead the physical, visceral experience of the *L-Beams*, *Battered Cubes*, and *Corner Piece*. The constant, known shapes, the gestalts,<sup>5</sup> of such works served as foils against which the mutability of experience was played out—conceptual clarity confounded by perceptual flux. Jasper Johns early on spoke of how he liked to work with “things the mind already knows. That gave me room to work on other levels.”<sup>6</sup> What the mind already knows is hardly clear. Which seems to be the relentless theme of those other levels in Johns’s work.

Morris’s works have for years pointedly revealed the processes of their construction, as if by this method to bluntly banish illusion. The expanded steel mesh of an untitled work from the 1961 notebooks, fabricated in 1988, exposes, inside and out, the structure of a square form framing an interior square space. The form itself is hollow, barely materialized by the open mesh planes that, like an axonometric drawing, describe its volume. But not even transparency can fend off illusion—“the fabric out of which our perceptions of *this* world are woven.”<sup>7</sup> The ethereal perfection of the fiberglass *L-Beams* of the sixties is echoed in the eighties by their veiled appearance in expanded steel. It is as though the *Ls* have turned to vapor.

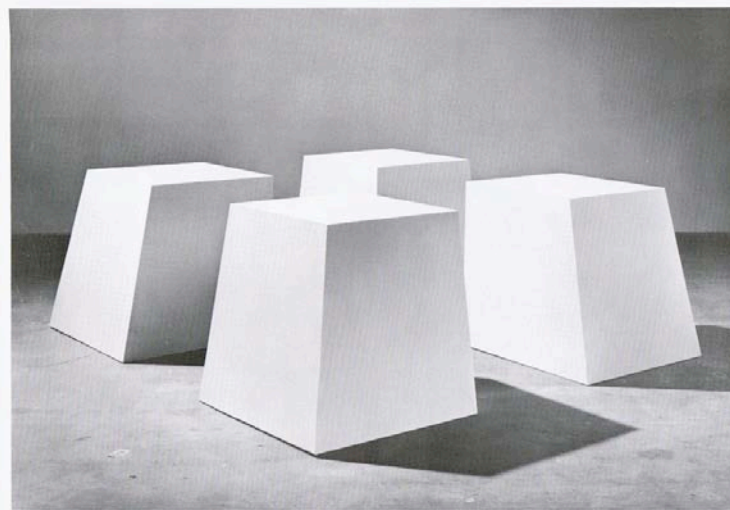
That revelation of process should be central to a work was certainly clear to Morris in Jackson Pollock’s painting. No doubt Pollock’s works loomed so large for the next generation in part because they were literal records of their making. Here were paintings that eluded the “diagrammatic” pathos of Cubism. But the all-over linear skeins of Pollock—those webs of pigment which attested to the possibility of action in real space—had themselves by the early fifties been invaded by the eyes and anatomies which haunted Pollock’s psyche, antecedent in their own way of the figural forms of Morris’s *Psychomachia* drawings and of the reliefs of this decade. The fragmented anatomies of the recent reliefs—skulls, fists, phalluses, torsos, the nestled shapes of a fetus—can scarcely be aligned with Cubism’s fractured world. The imagery of process, of making, which has figured in Morris’s work since *Box With the Sound of Its Own Making* of 1961, here gathers sombre resonance, linked as it is with destruction. Fists and phalluses push and pull through the images, duplicitous emblems of creation and aggression.



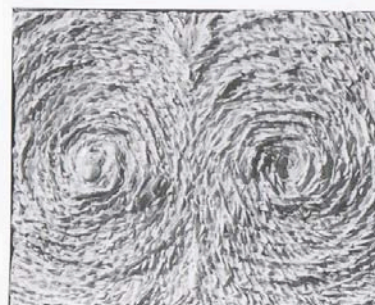
*Wheels II*, 1963–1988  
Corten steel  
84 x 84 x 48 inches



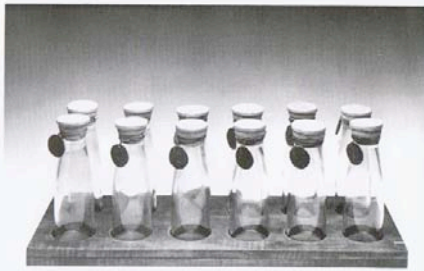
*Untitled*, 1961–1988  
Expanded steel  
36 x 96 x 96 inches



*Battered Cakes*, 1965–1988  
Painted steel  
Four elements, 36 x 36 x 36  
inches each



*Untitled*, 1982  
White hydrocol  
51 x 63 inches



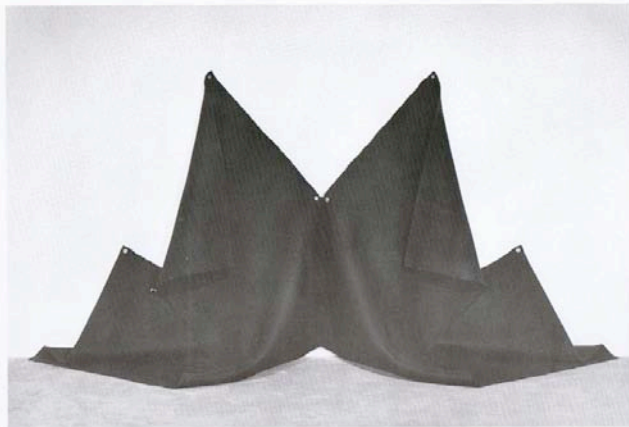
*Fresh Air*, 1963  
12 glass bottles, lead,  
aluminum foil with  
wooden base  
8½ x 22 x 8 inches



*Exhibition Installation*



*Exhibition Installation*



*Untitled*, 1980  
Black felt with metal grommets  
108 x 240 x 54 inches

*Brain Portrait*, 1963  
Graphite on paper, lead plates  
48 x 8½ inches



*Blind Time III*, 1985  
Graphite on paper  
38 x 50 inches



The chalky white surfaces of the *Hypnerotomachia* reliefs of 1982 recall, in more palpably three-dimensional guise, an image from Morris's childhood.

On certain long-ago Saturday mornings, fortified with my mother's encouragement, I made my way from the eastern part of Kansas City on the Swope Park Trolley, toward the Nelson Gallery. . . . I was eight years old and would spend the morning drawing in the galleries. . . . I remember most drawing from the Egyptian objects—reliefs, disembodied eyes, hands and snakes floating in the hieroglyphic dream space—unburdened by any horizon to designate that weary dualistic real world of the West where there always had to be a choice between earth and sky, heaven and hell, mind and body.<sup>8</sup>

Those pale limestone reliefs were worlds away from Kansas City's stockyards.

I can remember blazing summers when the acres of gates and chutes and sheds and scale houses stretched to the Caw River and the noise of thousands of animals from the west, the slamming of switching freight cars from the east, and the clanging of metal coming north from the Columbian Tank and Steel Co. all combined in an indescribable cacophony that echoed off the bluffs that towered over the west bottoms. . . . Despite its raucousness, its color, and the high spirits of the men, I knew what the shouts of "Cudahay," "Armour," "Wilson," "Swift and Co." at the scale house meant. This was one big zone devoted to death. The stockyards was a living funnel into those charnel house holes.<sup>9</sup>

During his visits to the Nelson Gallery, Morris probably encountered Pollaiuolo's fifteenth century engraving of the *Battle of the Ten Nudes*. Its stylized figures foreshadow the combatants of Morris's *Psychomachia* drawings of 1982, their theme of the struggle of good and evil for the soul of man derived from Prudentius's fifth century Latin poem.

In 1983 the reliefs began in many instances to frame interior images. In most, abstract paintings of seemingly cosmic upheaval spread from canvas to surrounding hydrocal or bronze relief. Inscriptions link the torrid images with the firestorms of 1945 (the subject of a 1982 series of drawings) and with the spectre of an arsenal equipped and poised for that "ultimate magnetic thought"<sup>10</sup> that would destroy life as we know it. As if to bear witness that the unthinkable is possible, the reliefs of the past two years incorporate images derived from photographs of the Holocaust. The hieroglyphic dream space tears open in the face of so much devastation. Earth and sky, mind and body blur in anguish.

The dissonance of Morris's work of the eighties speaks of issues far beyond the bounds of art. The *Blind Time III* drawings of 1985 probe that realm where perception, physics and metaphysics merge. In pencil beneath each drawing a task is outlined, a time estimated. Each text begins with a matter-of-fact account of the required sequence of actions—to create or rub out a grid, to draw a spiral, to make marks, to erase them. A second passage turns then to metaphorical meaning. And these drawings—abstract in appearance and ostensibly methodical in the making—become cosmic inquiries into creation and destruction and reflections on the role of the observer in forming the reality he perceives. A final textual note dutifully records "Time estimation error," as if to complete the bracketing of unanswerable questions by unassailable facts. The image of the artist blindfolded, working the graphite with bare hands against a clock he cannot watch becomes Godotlike. The drawings reiterate the journey from paradoxically elusive physical fact to metaphysical import—from Minimalism to firestorm.

Sally Yard

<sup>1</sup>Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 58. Robbe-Grillet's remark appeared as an epigraph to an article dealing with Morris's work by Yvonne Rainer ("Don't Give the Game Away," *Arts Magazine*, April 1967, p. 44).

<sup>2</sup>Robert Morris, Lecture at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California, April 18, 1988.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Morris, "Aligned with Nazca," *Artforum*, October 1975, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup>See Rosalind Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility—Reflection on Post '60s Sculpture," *Artforum*, November 1973, p. 50; and Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2," *Artforum*, October 1966, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2," p. 21.

<sup>6</sup>Leo Steinberg, *Jasper Johns* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1963), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup>This passage was written in reference to Donald Judd's work. Rosalind Krauss, "Objecthood," in *Critical Perspectives in American Art*, exhibition catalogue (Amherst: Fine Arts Center Gallery, University of Massachusetts, 1976), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup>Morris, Lecture, La Jolla.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

C H E C K L I S T O F T H E E X H I B I T I O N

F E L T S

*Untitled*, 1967  
Felt  
101 x 138 x 12 inches

*Untitled*, 1974  
Felt  
78 x 144 x 20 inches

*Untitled*, 1976  
Grey felt with metal grommets  
103 x 116 x 23 inches

*Untitled*, 1980  
Black felt with metal grommets  
108 x 240 x 54 inches

P A I N T I N G S

*Untitled*, 1987  
Silkscreen, encaustic/aluminum, fiberglass  
51½ x 57½ x 3¼ inches

*Untitled*, 1987  
Silkscreen, encaustic/aluminum, fiberglass  
67¼ x 55 x 4 inches

*Untitled*, 1987  
Silkscreen, encaustic/aluminum, fiberglass  
45½ x 53½ x 4½ inches

*Untitled*, 1987  
Silkscreen, encaustic/aluminum, fiberglass  
45½ x 53½ x 4 inches

*Untitled*, 1987  
Silkscreen, encaustic/aluminum, fiberglass  
71½ x 107¼ x 15¼ inches

R E L I E F S

*Untitled*, 1982  
White hydrocal  
51 x 63 inches

*Untitled*, 1982  
White hydrocal  
63 x 51 inches

O B J E C T S

*Heart*, 1963  
Painted wood, rubber,  
electrical motor and batteries  
9 x 7½ x 5½ inches

*Location*, 1963  
Lead over wood; edition of 17  
21 x 21 x ¾ inches

*Untitled*, 1963  
Bronze  
13 x 7½ x 3½ inches

O B J E C T S

*Yes/No*, 1963  
Painted wood, aluminum  
Two elements, 36¼ x 5½ x 11½ inches each

*Fresh Air*, 1963  
12 glass bottles, lead, aluminum foil with wooden base  
8¼ x 22 x 8 inches

*Golden Memories*, 1963  
Lead over wood, metal hook, gold painted rope;  
edition of 17  
5½ x 28¼ x 7 inches

*Ruler With Shadow*, 1963  
Painted wood and ruler  
24 x 24 x 2¼ inches

*Two 12-inch Hinged Rulers*, 1963  
Painted wood, rulers  
5½ x 17 x 2 inches

*Untitled*, 1964  
Lead over wood  
36 x 24½ x 4½ inches

S C U L P T U R E

*Untitled*, 1961–1988  
Expanded steel  
36 x 96 x 96 inches

*Wheels II*, 1963–1988  
Corten steel  
84 x 84 x 48 inches

*Corner Piece*, 1964–1988  
Steel  
72 x 72 x 50 inches

*Battered Cubes*, 1965–1988  
Painted steel  
Four elements, 36 x 36 x 36 inches each

*The Ells*, 1965–1988  
Expanded steel  
Three elements, 96 x 96 x 24 inches each

D R A W I N G S

*Mail Sacks*, 1961  
Graphite on grey paper  
20½ x 17 inches

*Brain Portrait*, 1963  
Graphite on paper, lead plates  
48 x 8½ inches

*Five Memory Drawings*, 1963  
Ink on grey paper  
20½ x 13 inches (each)

*Untitled (Magnetic Fields)*, 1964  
Graphite on paper  
10¼ x 13 inches

*Ottawa Project (Scattered Boulders)*, 1970  
Graphite on graph paper  
22 x 31 inches

D R A W I N G S

*Small Ash Tree*, 1972  
Graphite on paper  
22 x 30 inches

*Blind Time III*, 1985  
Graphite on paper  
38 x 50 inches

*Remembering Boltzman Blind Time III*, 1985  
Graphite on paper  
38 x 50 inches

*Battered Cubes II*, 1988  
Ink on mylar  
30 x 42 inches

*The Ells II, III*, 1988  
Ink on mylar  
30 x 42 inches

*Wheels II*, 1988  
Ink on mylar  
30 x 42 inches

*Untitled (from the 1961 notebooks)*, 1988  
Ink on mylar  
30 x 42 inches

*Three Corner Pieces (from the 1964 notebooks)*, 1988  
Ink on mylar  
30 x 42 inches

Cover illustration:  
*The Ells*, 1965–1988  
Expanded steel  
96 x 96 x 24 inches

Photo: Douglas M. Parker Studio  
© 1989 Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles