

## EXHIBITED WORKS

## LARGE-FORM OBJECTS

Robert Morris moved to New York in 1961, settling in a loft in Lower Manhattan with his then wife, the dancer Simone Forti. Abandoning his abstract painting practice, he immersed himself in the collective of performers, composers, and visual artists around Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. Named Judson Dance Theater after its venue, the group reimagined dance as simple expenditures of energy—running, standing, slouching—that cast the performer as a “neutral ‘doer.’”<sup>1</sup> In addition to pedestrian tasks, Forti often made use of plywood props, including planks, boxes, and seesaws, as a means of generating movement. These “constructions,” as she called them, were frequently built by Morris, who participated in several of her performances and created his own—many of them likewise centered on objects that he variously engaged.<sup>2</sup> The results were dubbed the “new dance,” an analogue to the equally capacious critical epithet the “new sculpture” that described Morris’s early, large-scale objects.<sup>3</sup>

Conceived in 1961 (though not realized until 1978), *Untitled (Pine Portal with Mirrors)* consists of four plywood planks. Simply joined, the doorwaylike structure is lined on either interior side with mirrors. Guided by the criteria of what Morris termed the “well-built,” it rests directly on the floor, making no claim to the separate aesthetic space traditionally reserved for sculpture.<sup>4</sup> Instead, it solicits engagement with the viewer’s body, beckoning her to pass through it as if it were a prop for a performance. As one traverses the structure, one sees an image of one’s body from behind, thus creating the unsettling impression of being in two places at once, the first slightly past, the second concretely present. Multiplying and dispersing the viewer’s body, *Untitled (Pine Portal with Mirrors)* introduces incongruities that challenge the seeming simplicity of “neutral doing.”

As the 1960s progressed, Morris increasingly courted visual paradox, blurring conventional distinctions between static sculpture and time-bound performance. In *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* (1965/1971) (fig.1), four wooden cubes laminated with mirrors meet in a square pattern determined by their dimensions—the distance between each unit is equivalent to that of another, invisible cube. The orthogonal nature of the array and its components correspond, in turn, to the rectilinearity of the room. This play of presence and absence defines the work, which at once reflects its surroundings and dissolves into them. *Untitled (Quarter-Round Mesh)* (1967/1986)

1. The phrase is that of Forti’s peer Yvonne Rainer in “A Quasi Survey of Some Minimalist Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of” in ed. Gregory Battcock (1968; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 267.
2. Robert Morris, “Notes on Dance,” *Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1965): 179.
3. The terms are not of Morris’s coinage, but their inclusivity suited his ends, and he used them in his writing. See *ibid.*, 180, and Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2” (1966) in *October Books* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 14.
4. Robert Morris, “Anti Form,” *Artforum* 6, no. 8 (April 1968), 34.

(fig. 2) similarly tropes the entwinement of positive and negative form. Steel mesh curves upward around an armature that culminates in a central, empty cubic space, its weave shifting and shimmering in a dynamic moiré that moves with the viewer as she navigates the space around it. The work's basic geometries yield to perplexity as the mesh rhythmically opens and closes, echoing the *Mirrored Cubes*' own hypnotic tangle of reflections.

*Untitled (Ring with Light)* (1965-66) (fig. 3) is among Morris's first sculptures made from fiberglass, which he favored for its ability to achieve rounded edges and smooth surfaces. Its two hemispherical parts form a ring interrupted by a gap from which light emerges, produced by fixtures lining the ring's interior. Lucid and steady, this glow is by turns banal—the stuff of office space—and otherworldly. *Untitled (Fiberglass Frame)* (1968) (fig. 4) likewise effects an eerie luminosity, its surface defined by a sinewy translucence. Dwelling like many of Morris's early objects on the perplexities of the border—that hairline between inside and outside, artwork and world—it lays bare the equivocation that animates Morris's project, even at its most ostensibly straightforward.

#### L-BEAMS (PLYWOOD) (1965)

Three L's assuming three postures: one upright, another laid flat, the third poised on its tips. Identical in dimension and shape, they confront the viewer at a scale slightly larger than human. Composed of plywood, they sport even coats of house paint, a color called Pilgrim Gray that attracted Morris for its emotional flatness and Puritan register. Their construction—the product of Morris's modest carpentry skills—leaves little else to remark. Textureless and materially cheap, each instanced what he termed "Blank Form" in a 1961 text of that title—a category that was "like life, essentially empty."<sup>5</sup> These three units reduced rectilinear geometry to its essential element, the right angle: a readymade shape, tracing back to Neolithic post-and-lintel architectures, that Morris endorsed for its "generalized usefulness."<sup>6</sup>

Morris made *L-Beams (Plywood)* (fig. 5) for his 1965 exhibition at Green Gallery in New York. The show was the pendant to his presentation at the same venue of the year prior, which consisted of seven plywood sculptures, each likewise painted Pilgrim Gray and subtitled after basic architectures: *Slab*, *Border*, *Beam*, and so on. Conceived as a group of three components, *L-Beams* first appeared as a set of two; lacking some combination of time and energy, Morris failed to complete the third. Displayed again as a pair in the landmark exhibition *Primary Structures* at New York's Jewish Museum

5. Robert Morris, "Blank Form" (1961), in ed. Barbara Haskell, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984), 101.

6. Morris, "Anti Form," 34.



Fig. 1: Robert Morris, *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)*, 1965; reconstructed 1971

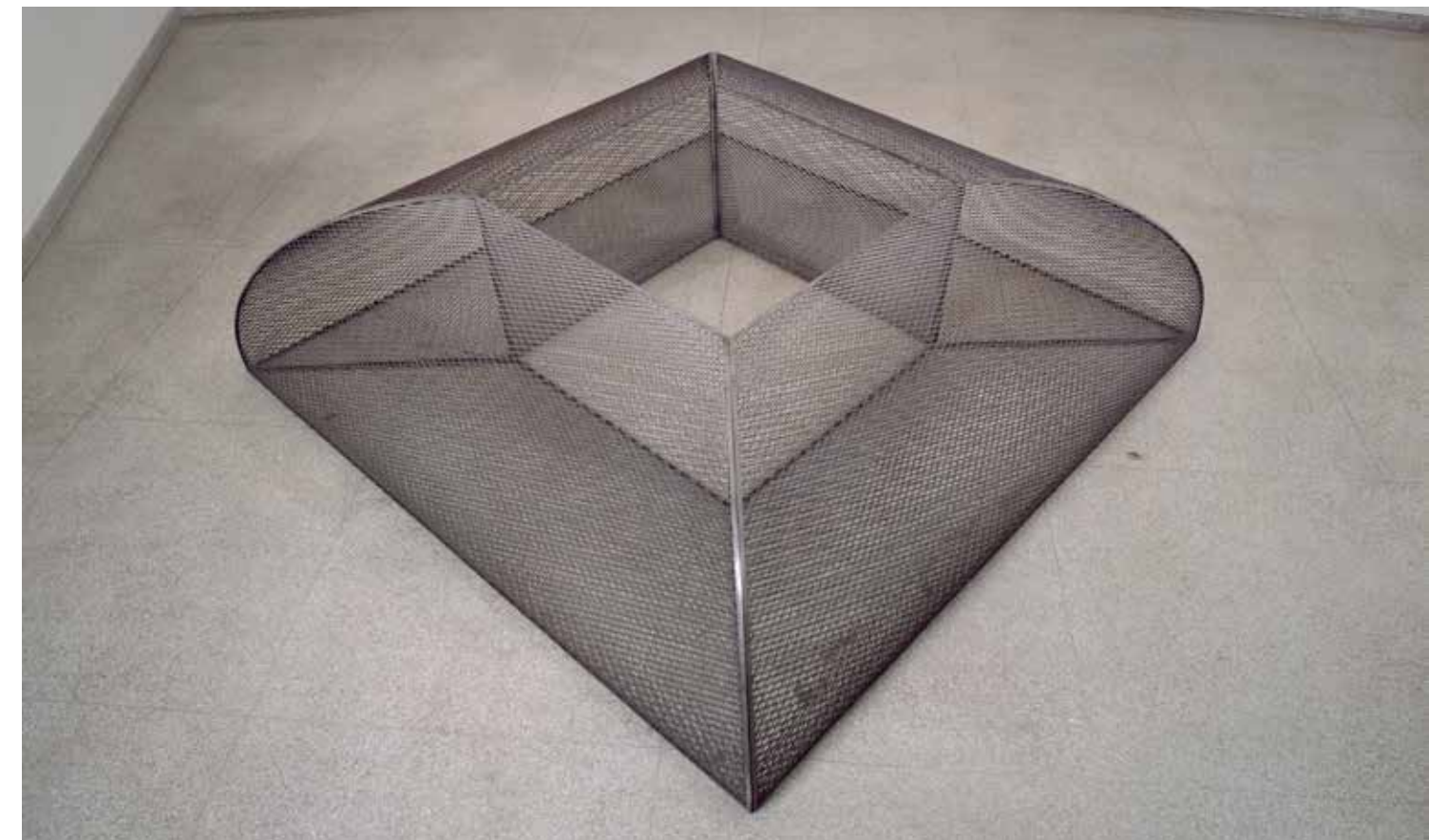


Fig. 2: Robert Morris, *Untitled (Quarter-Round Mesh)*, 1967/1986



Fig. 3: Robert Morris, *Untitled (Ring with Light)*, 1965-66



Fig. 4: Robert Morris, *Untitled (Fiberglass Frame)*, 1968

in 1966—a survey of American and British sculpture’s post-1960 shift toward geometric reduction—it was not realized as a trio until several years later.

Whether as two or their intended three, *L-Beams* has been repeatedly received as a manifesto piece, a demonstration of the rigorous theoretical thinking Morris distilled in the four-part “Notes on Sculpture” published in *Artforum* magazine from 1966 to 1969. Along with Donald Judd’s 1965 essay “Specific Objects” (to which they were a conscious riposte), the first two “Notes” became the ur-documents of “Minimal art,” an appellation that emerged the same year to describe a spate of three-dimensional works that seemed only to “exclude” and “reject.”<sup>7</sup> In its initial, pejorative usage, the term “Minimal” implied a lack of imagery, invention, and import. “Hostile,” “bland,” and “boring” in the words of its critics, Minimalism—of which Morris’s *L-Beams* became the textbook illustration—was seen to approach a state so matter of fact that it canceled signification.<sup>8</sup> It challenged the possibility of interpretation, asking not simply what art could mean but whether it meant anything at all.

For his part, Morris placed “Minimal” in scare quotes. His own work, he claimed, could be judged only against conventional definitions of art. His use of spare geometries and no-frills facture, together with his suppression of color, texture, and internal divisions, occasioned not a nihilistic reduction—a dwindling to the condition of nonart—but a radical expansion that pushed sculpture beyond the bounds of material form. “The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer’s field of vision,” Morris explained in part two of the “Notes.”<sup>9</sup> His *L-Beams* specified a permuting system of positions, each of which was further serialized by the particularities of the object’s setting and the viewer’s position within it. Rejecting the pedestaled perch of traditional sculpture, it cultivated what art historian Annette Michelson, drawing on the pragmatism of Charles Peirce and the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, termed “co-presence.” As merely one term in a broader situation, Morris’s *L-Beams* “redirect attention, heightening consciousness of what it is to attend and to perceive.”<sup>10</sup> Its components do not negate but rather revise meaning, forged through an interplay between “the known constant”—the rigid structure of the L—and the “experienced variable”—its changing manifestation as the viewer moves around it in space and time.<sup>11</sup>

7. The final two “Notes” theorized what artists, critics, and scholars alike would position as Minimalism’s successor, Postminimalism. “Exclude” is Carl Andre’s term; “reject” is Lucy Lippard’s. See Andre, “Preface to Stripe Painting,” in *Sixteen Americans*, ed. Dorothy Miller, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), n.p., and Lippard, “New York Letter: Rejective Art,” in *Changing* (New York: Dutton, 1971), 141–53.

8. Barbara Rose, “ABC Art,” 53, no. 5 (October/November 1965), 57.

9. Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” 15.

10. Annette Michelson, “Robert Morris—An Aesthetics of Transgression,” in exh. cat. (Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969), 67.

11. Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” 17.



“From the subjective point of view there is no such thing as nothing—Blank Form shows this,” Morris’s eponymous text opens.<sup>12</sup> Subtly changing with each shift in the viewer’s stance, *L-Beams* enacts the instability of three-dimensional form: a performance in which both object and viewer feature as vital protagonists. Its structure encodes ambivalence, pushing against the presumed aniconism of Minimalism. Indeed, in Morris’s account, such right-angled forms resonated with their mid-1960s moment, iterating the basic unit of industrial manufacture.<sup>13</sup> Although *L-Beams* was adamantly abstract, it nevertheless signified, bespeaking efficiency—or, in another interpretation, figuration.<sup>14</sup> Rife with connotations, *L-Beams*’ so-called blankness was also “like life.”

### SCATTER PIECE (1968–69)

*Scatter Piece* (fig. 6) declares its logic in its title. It consists of two hundred discrete elements, each generated from a single, untransformed material, that have been strewn across the gallery’s floor. Half are made from one of six metals—steel, lead, zinc, copper, aluminum, and brass; the remainder are pieces of pressed black felt. The metals assume one of three poses—flat, bent once, or bent twice—while the felt’s softness enables more permissive attitudes: slouched atop other elements, wedged in the join between walls, and so on. First staged in the winter of 1968–69 in the uptown warehouse of Leo Castelli Gallery in New York alongside another mutable constellation of particulate materials, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, it was dismantled following the show’s run and placed in storage. At some point, it was accidentally thrown away. The work’s ready disassembly and even readier disposal underscores its ephemerality. Like his early plywood objects, produced on the occasion of an exhibition and taken apart if unsold, *Scatter Piece* exists not as a static tableau but as an ongoing proposition whose realization can assume multiple forms over time.

*Scatter Piece*’s spontaneity turns on its relation to system. Specific procedures—originally, the tossing of coins and the selection of random numbers from a New York City telephone book—determine the width, weight, and bearing of its units. The work thus inserts itself within a longer avant-garde history of chance, from the Dada collages of Jean Arp, formed by dropping torn fragments of paper onto a sticky surface, to the experimental music of John Cage, whom Morris met upon his arrival in New York following a lengthy correspondence. Making similar use of coins and telephone books, Cage courted

12. Morris, “Blank Form,” 101.

13. Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 3” (1967), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, 38–39.

14. For example, neoclassical sculptors, drawing on the tradition of the classical frieze, often presented the human figure from multiple positions within a single work. For a discussion of this tendency, see Rosalind Krauss, (New York: Viking, 1977), 17–20.



Fig. 5: Robert Morris, *L Beams*, 1965



Fig. 6: Robert Morris, *Untitled (Scatter Piece)*, 1968-69



the contradiction of randomness rigorously implemented, what Arp had termed the “laws of chance.”<sup>15</sup> Detailed in meticulous diagrams, Morris’s instructions likewise limit the fabrication of *Scatter Piece* to a range of predetermined options. There is no set form to the installation: while guided by the whims of its installer—which, during Morris’s lifetime, as in the present exhibition, need not have been the artist himself—its configuration is also qualified by the room in which it resides.<sup>16</sup> Spend time with it, and a counterpoint emerges—symmetries among diagonals, parallel pairings of rigid and soft—that lends a provisional armature to its otherwise unruly field.

“Certain art is now using as its beginning and as its means, stuff, substances in many states—from chunks, to particles, to slime, to whatever—and prethought images are neither necessary nor possible. Alongside this approach is chance, contingency, indeterminacy—in short, the entire area of process,” Morris wrote in the fourth part of his “Notes on Sculpture,” published in *Artforum* the same year as *Scatter Piece*’s debut.<sup>17</sup> A constant within the moment’s critical and artistic discourse, “process” partakes in the logic of “scatter.” True to the performative origins of Morris’s practice, both remake sculpture as an event. Lateral spreads of material were a pervasive trope of the period, featuring in the work of Carl Andre, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson, among others. Each deployed the scatter as a means of challenging the self-contained status of sculpture, defined by its vertical remove from the ground and its endurance over time. Foregrounding the essential irresolution of material form—a perplexity that also guides Morris’s *L-Beams* and early objects—*Scatter Piece* lingers on the affective presence of so much pedestrian “stuff,” held between structure and dissolution.

#### FELTS (1970s)

In 1967, Morris turned to the sculptural potential of softness. Experimenting with different kinds of felt, he settled on a heavy, industrial variety that balanced flexibility and stiffness. Laying the fabric on the floor, he marked it with lines and incised them with a razor. He then lifted the material onto the wall, coaxing it onto a pattern of fixtures. Released from Morris’s hand, the felt deferred to gravity. Its downward pull prompts a transitive verbal scheme—hang, sag, spill, gather, heap—forming the felt in ways that could be only partly known in advance. Clear geometry—the surgical precision of the cut—gave way to indeterminacy: a dual formal and conceptual irresolution that spoke to Morris’s interest in Cage’s coupling of system and chance.

15. Arp added the phrase “According to the Laws of Chance” to the titles of some of his Dada collages.

16. The installation of *Scatter Piece* at Mudam Luxembourg was carried out by schoolchildren.

17. Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4” (1969), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, 67.



Fig 7: Robert Morris, *Felt Piece*, 1974



Fig. 8: Robert Morris, *Untitled (Brown Felt)*, 1973

The *Felts* (examples: fig. 7 & 8) were first displayed in April 1968 at Leo Castelli; that same month, Morris's article "Anti Form" appeared in *Artforum*. The essay was his inaugural formulation of "process," a concept he would elaborate in his exhibition of the following year with *Scatter Piece*. In the text, Morris pushes against his early Minimalist work, branding its reliance on rigid geometries as a "functioning Idealism."<sup>18</sup> These simple shapes, he now opines, relayed to a transcendental realm: the space of Plato's Forms, whose material manifestation is always secondary to their mental conception. The art of "Anti Form" drew its order not from an imposed scheme but from its own inherent properties—weight, resistance, and so forth—as they submitted to natural forces. The result was an artwork that appeared to make itself. Morris identifies such autotelic logics in the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, wherein paint settled in congeries determined by the conjunction of its own liquidity and thickness with gravity. An image of Pollock's *One: Number 31, 1950* (1950)—a mesmeric weave of black, white, brown, and gray oil and enamel—appeared on the second page of "Anti Form," following the opening shot of Morris's own *Untitled: an analogous snarl of felt strips, tumbling from wall to floor like one of Pollock's gestures*.<sup>19</sup> Pollock's title contains the collapsing of binaries that "process" sought: material and form, ends and means, held in seamless synchrony.

The *Felts* attest to Morris's ability to rethink his own project, revising its premises for the 1970s, a moment when the right-angled rigor of Minimalism had reached an impasse. Dramatic and strange, they emphasize the alterity of matter: its ability to organize itself, absent all but the artist's initial intervention. At the same time, they bespeak a figural presence through their skinlike pliancy, which is bound by the same constraints as the body. Moving backward from Pollock, Morris traced anti form to the *non finito* of the late Renaissance: the tendency of Michelangelo and others to leave their sculptures unfinished, forever poised in the process of forming.<sup>20</sup> His appeal to the cinquecento inserts the *Felts* into the classical tradition of sculptural drapery, wherein hard marble loosens into undulant folds that enclose a human form. Yet the *Felts* also had more immediate referents, such as the stuffed sculptures of Claes Oldenburg, whose everyday objects, grossly enlarged, strike anthropomorphic poses.<sup>21</sup> Their uncanny bodiliness elicited a sensuous response, which many critics and scholars likewise divined in the felts, whose folds—increasingly complex as the series stretched into the 1980s—hinted at genitals. They seemed to compel a return of all that Minimalism had repressed: image, metaphor, body. But the *Felt's* reversal was not so clear cut: by definition, these repressed terms were always

there, latent in the bodily scale, permuted postures, and performative premise of his early sculptures.

#### PORTLAND MIRRORS (1977)

"At first I begrudged its appearance, attempted to suppress it, then ended by accepting it," Morris asserted in 1979.<sup>22</sup> "It" was the mirror, an object whose "fraudulent space" and "blatant illusionism" would seem incompatible with Morris's initial Minimalist project, whose commitment to the "sculptural facts of space, light, and materials" admitted only those elements that functioned "concretely and literally," as part one of his "Notes on Sculpture" declared.<sup>23</sup> His first work to incorporate mirrors, *Untitled (Pine Portal with Mirrors)* (1961) (fig. 9), thus appears as an outlier, a seeming momentary misstep before his arrival at the intransigence of plywood, painted gray. *Mirrored Cubes* (1965), which shortly followed, gives the lie to this literalist trajectory, revealing the mirror to be a keynote of Morris's oeuvre. Rendering the object as a ricochet of reflections, it introduced what Robert Smithson diagnosed that same year in an essay about Donald Judd as "uncanny materiality."<sup>24</sup> Pairing translucent Plexiglas with shiny metals, Judd's boxlike sculptures introduced complex visual effects for which their construction could not account. As in Morris's mirror works, sight served not to secure but rather erode certainty. "The more one tries to grasp the surface structure, the more baffling it becomes," Smithson explained.<sup>25</sup>

*Portland Mirrors* (fig. 10) belongs to a handful of room-size installations that confect mirrors, frames, and geometric elements—among them, suspended steel frames and blunt wooden beams—that Morris began in the early 1970s. First staged at the Portland Center for the Visual Arts in Oregon, the work occupies a single room, positioning four large rectangular mirrors atop the floor at the center of each of the room's four walls. Thick wooden frames italicize the mirrors' physicality, weighting them within the room. A diamond-shaped armature of timbers runs among the mirrors, abutting the midpoint of each. Massive and materially raw, the timbers multiply, extending into the implied interior of each mirror in an infinite zigzag. Their position, together with the viewer's own, becomes uncertain as secure spatial coordinates give way to a volley of perceptions and misperceptions. While mirrors typically serve to orient, presenting an image of the self stabilized within its surrounds, here reflection and reality fail to coincide. The mirrors' distortions prompt a range of nonart associations, exposing them as "a kind of

18. Morris, "Anti Form," 35.

19. *Ibid.*, 34.

20. *Ibid.*, 35.

21. Oldenburg's *Giant Soft Fan (Ghost Version)* (1967) is depicted on the final page of "Anti Form." See *ibid.*

22. Robert Morris, *Robert Morris: Mirror Works 1961–78*, exh. cat. (New York: Leo Castelli, 1979), n.p.

23. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1" (1966), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, 3.

24. "Donald Judd" (1965), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 6.

25. *Ibid.*



Fig. 9: Robert Morris, *Untitled (Pine Portal with Mirrors)*, 1961

disco-degenerate category,” as Morris put it.<sup>26</sup> His references were at once high and low: he mentioned Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656), whose backgrounded mirror meditates on the profundities of pictorial representation, then moved to Orson Welles’s *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), wherein a fun-house maze of mirrors occasions a dramatic shoot-out.<sup>27</sup>

For Morris, the mirror was a motor for paradox, slipping constantly between materiality and metaphor. Its visual effects double as conceptual statements, elaborating an iconography (and, one might further claim, an ethics) of paradox and irresolution. Reflection, Morris argued, described both a visual and a mental operation: a process in which the subject—the seeing “I”—comes to apprehend the world through an externalized “me,” who is constituted by language, memory, or, in this case, images.<sup>28</sup> Like *L-Beams*, which stresses the indissolubility of knowledge and lived experience, *Portland Mirrors* elaborates both a specific kind of sculpture and a specific kind of subject. Dispersing and dissimulating, it vaults the viewer into a vexed (and vexing) environment in which reflections confound rather than shore up one’s sense of self. *Portland Mirrors* thus demands that we consider Morris’s oeuvre against a broader critical horizon than Minimalism’s proscriptions afford, one in which multiple mediums intersect and aesthetics and philosophy are inextricably entwined.

26. Morris, *Mirror Works*, n.p.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Robert Morris, “The Present Tense of Space” (1978), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, 177–82.