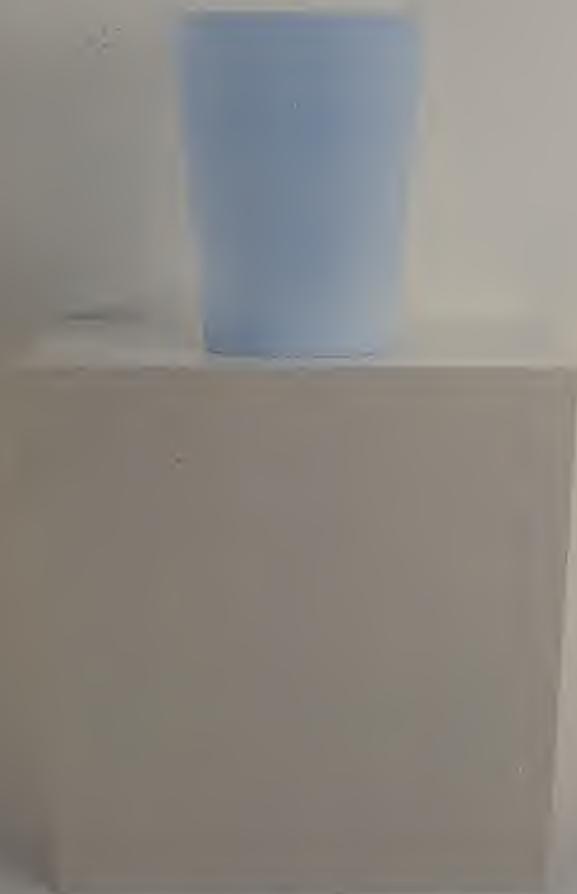


O S M O S I S

ETTORE SPALLETTI • HAIM STEINBACH



GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM





OSMOSIS

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O S M O S I S

ETTORE SPALLETTI • HAIM STEINBACH

G U G G E N H E I M M U S E U M

P R E F A C E A N D A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

T H O M A S K R E N S

The *Osmosis* series is presented as an alternative to the museum's more traditional program of one-person and thematic exhibitions. These conventional formats tend to underscore the ingenuity of one artist's achievements or the singularity of a particular aesthetic movement. As a challenge to such notions, which perpetuate Modernism's faith in the concept of originality, *Osmosis* will encourage artists to work collaboratively, mining new aesthetic territory.

Artistic partnerships—whether fleeting or long-term—have flourished throughout the twentieth century. Creative teams, such as Serge Diaghilev and Pablo Picasso, and John Cage and Merce Cunningham, worked collectively to redefine the boundaries of each contributor's art form. During recent years, collaborative alliances—including those of Gilbert and George, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Group Material, and General Idea—have emerged in defiance of a cultural system that privileges the individual artistic personality.

The *Osmosis* series, consisting of four exhibitions presented over the

next three years, brings together artists from divergent disciplines and different cultures, whose work may not otherwise have been linked. The goal of this process is to promote dialogue, aesthetic interaction, and a synthesis of sensibilities. Whatever the final outcome of each collaboration may be, it will represent a hybridization of distinct expressive means.

The inaugural exhibition of the series pairs two visual artists, Ettore Spalletti and Haim Steinbach, whose oeuvres seem incongruous at first glance. Spalletti is known for his freestanding geometric sculptures, the austere forms and delicate tonal harmonies of which readily suggest the artist's native Italian culture: the elegant contours of Roman amphorae, the still figures of Piero della Francesca, and the abstracted forms of Giorgio Morandi's meditative still lifes. Steinbach, by contrast, culls contemporary artifacts from material culture. He then juxtaposes these diverse found objects on his signature wedged shelves, effecting subtle and unexpected correspondences that describe current cultural realities and value systems. Steinbach's incorporation of exercise equipment into his art, for instance, demonstrates his critical investigation of the particularly American fixation on physical stamina and the "body beautiful."

An exhibition of such an experimental nature could not have happened without the artists' willingness to enter a collaborative dialogue, share materials and ideas, and seek new aesthetic solutions. During the past two years, Spalletti and Steinbach have met in New York and Italy to explore potential points of artistic exchange. We are most grateful for their enthusiastic response to our invitation to participate in this series and their untiring efforts to produce this innovative exhibition. It would have been impossible to present this installation without the generous contributions of our exhibition sponsors, the Banco di Napoli

and the Zerynthia Association, to whom we are most indebted. Giuliana Setari was instrumental in helping the museum secure this funding; her faith in the experimental process must be commended. We must also extend our appreciation to Mario Pieroni of the Zerynthia Association, Antonio Homem of Sonnabend Gallery, and Jay Gorney of Jay Gorney Modern Art for their assistance in the realization of this exhibition. Haim Steinbach's studio assistants Alan Irikura and Robert Reynolds were a constant source of information and materials. In Italy, Bonizzella Zazzeroni and Anna Constantini were invaluable to the project. A special thanks also goes to Pandora Tabatabai Asbaghi for her consistent insight into the collaborative process. We are also most grateful to Louise Neri and Parkett/Scalo Publishers for their contribution to the conceptual development of this publication.

The dedication of Guggenheim staff members made this presentation possible. Working closely with the artists, Jon Ippolito, Project Curatorial Assistant, deftly and tirelessly organized all aspects of the exhibition. The Technical Services staff, headed by Pamela Myers, Administrator for Exhibitions and Programming, lent valuable assistance to the mounting of this installation. The commitment of the Publications Department, led by Anthony Calnek, Managing Editor, was indispensable to the production of this catalogue. We must also thank Any Henderson, who lent her talents to the design of this book and the *Osmosis* series publications as a whole. Finally, we owe our thanks to the exhibition's curator, Germano Celant, Curator of Contemporary Art, who, in collaboration with Associate Curator Nancy Spector, developed the *Osmosis* series. Mr. Celant's innovative vision and lifelong commitment to collaborating with artists have led to the realization of what promises to be an important new approach to exhibitions at the Guggenheim.

OSMOSIS

GERMANO CELANT

The determining feature of the *Osmosis* series is the movement that emerges from the dialogues it promotes between languages that are sometimes similar, other times very different: in the course of the series, we will see pairings between those who are conversant in art and architecture, art and theater, art and film, art and art, art and photography, art and music. Our aim is to find a more synthetic condition for creative work, for certainly the mutual feedback, the blending of approaches, we anticipate will lead to wholly new and unpredictable experiences.

The prompting of an exchange of energy between two artists may be tantamount to defining the host museum as a thesis, an argument, a consideration, the purpose of which is to develop and deepen an interchange among all the arts. Thus, the univocal structure of a “normal” exhibition is replaced by the vast communications network of a culture that is visual and spatial, aural and tactile, constructive and spectacle-oriented. *Osmosis* heads toward and across the “other,”

reviewing and gathering the history of creativity wherever it has occurred. Hence, we emancipate the institution from all limits, liberate it from obstacles built up by sects and departments, so that it will be employed as an unconditionally flexible and versatile instrument. The unique subject disappears; the museum is allowed to achieve its maximum expansion and art becomes its fulfillment.

The assembling and coalescing of opposites brings an end to hero worship. Osmosis occurs through language, making things concrete in a dialogue and dialectic of forms and signs, colors and actions. The focus shifts from the artist, as actor and protagonist, to language, which is the true source of new experiences and experiments. By giving priority to unity and exchange over distinction and competition, *Osmosis* tries to rethink art as a public process and operation, analogous to scientific research based on teamwork.

Still and all, our purpose is not to eliminate the originality of unique and individual effort. Instead, by returning to the work as a construction and expression of a practice inscribed in the histories of other languages, we hope to venture into new solutions and reflections. This does not mean reducing differences or flattening out all forms and languages into a single register. Rather, we are engaging in a dizzying operation that wipes out the primacy of identity. In this way, we underscore the value of a dimension that has all the characteristics of an experiment in helping to change our relations to ourselves, to reality, and to space. Though this maelstrom may do away with architecture or design or theater or cinema or art or music as individual subjects, it nevertheless directly fosters an alteration of seeing and perceiving. *Osmosis* is an opportunity for exception.

(Translated, from the Italian, by Joachim Neugroschel.)

THE DUALISM OF THE BANAL AND THE SUBLIME

GERMANO CELANT

The history of art has been characterized by a raging dispute about the image: one camp has insisted that the relationship between icon and reality is fundamental, while the other has rejected figuration outright, advocating instead an essential and puristic idea of the world. From Byzantium to Rome, from Jerusalem to Moscow, from Paris to New York, iconophilia and iconoclasm have been involved in a profound conflict, which, both religious and secular, formal and spiritual, physical and metaphysical, has flared up again and again. Creating sects and trends, the defenders and the destroyers of images have engaged in huge and bloody quarrels that are still raging today.

From 1945 to the present, this dispute has been at the heart of all discourse about fiction and reality, matter and spirit, copy and original. We need only think of the theoretical and philosophical encounters between Social Realists and Abstract Expressionists, Pop artists and Minimalists, Neo-Expressionists and Conceptual artists. Theirs were battles in a war that pits an art linked to both the visible and the

invisible world against an art of personal expression, mass media, scientific phenomenology, or pure visuality.

The rivalry between worldliness and archetype, between West and East, between the Protestant and the Catholic spirit, has always illuminated the developments and the theses of art. Some artists, from Giorgio de Chirico to René Magritte, from Francis Bacon to Balthus, from Andy Warhol to Anselm Kiefer, have favored representation in order to incarnate the physical world and its sensory condition. Their works maintain the tradition of a visual theology derived from the great icons of the Renaissance and Russia. Devouring any object or image stemming from the individual and society, these iconophiles challenge the reductive and indifferent notion of art. Indeed, because they view art as inadequate for life, they take on a realistic position precisely in order to allow the coexistence of art and life. Other artists, from Piet Mondrian to Kazimir Malevich, from Barnett Newman to Ad Reinhardt, from Donald Judd to Joseph Kosuth, have negated earthly and carnal images, creating instead an ontological nexus between image and mental archetype, between the constructive and the philosophical. Their goal has been to safeguard the purity and essence of the concept against the representation of the mundane experiences of reality. This anti-iconic vision is essentially moral and messianic; it demands an art that is a necessary instrument or vehicle for qualifying and understanding the cultural context. Theirs is an independent procedure based on sound principles and having sound results.

Both camps claim they are constructing a “gap” between art and reality—the iconophiles base their art on the absolute present, while the iconoclasts rely on the probable future for theirs. In the past, no compromise was possible between these two positions; but today the differences between them are mere nuances, and their extremist position cannot be maintained.

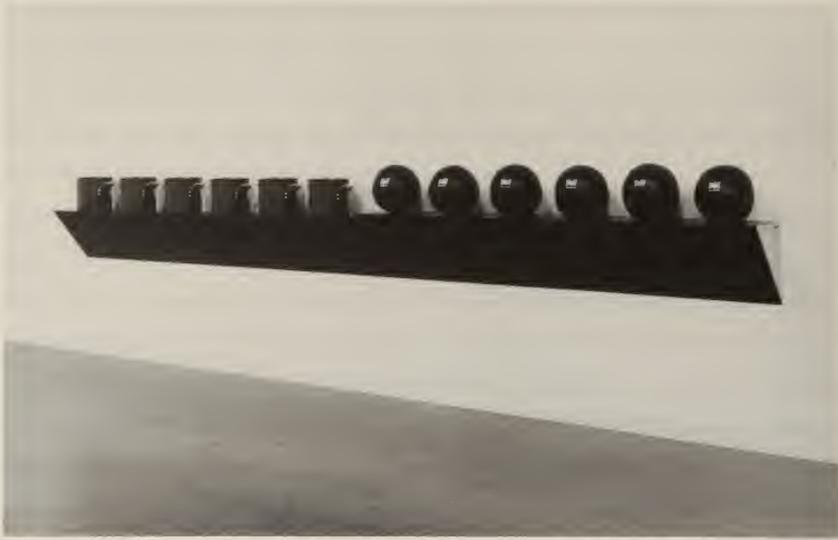
The most recent generation of artists has been attempting to transcend the contradiction between total acceptance of the historical world and the closing of the archetypal vision. Their efforts have led to a concept of the "image" that has definitively surpassed both the theory of the idea and the theory of the hallucinatory resemblance to reality. The paths of the iconists and anti-iconists are interwoven and equally insignificant, each of them materializing in an image.

This situation opens art up to unexpected possibilities. No longer expressed in partial and sectarian identities, art fuses into a single and unique body, the definition of which unfolds from an accumulation of directions and pluralities. Art now wanders and oscillates between various possible modes, both divergent and convergent, iconic and anti-iconic. This is virtually a passage from the monocentric circle of the Renaissance to the polycentric ellipse of the Baroque.

Art is on the threshold between the physical and the metaphysical, between the sensible and the intelligible. This is a territory not of harmony and conciliation, but of connection and transition; it may be expressed as a visual membrane between mirror images that create a perfect circularity between diverse and contrasting universes, fiction and reality, Pop and Minimalism, copy and original, Neo-Expressionism and Conceptualism, matter and spirit, public and private, visible and invisible.

The existence of this *intermediate surface*, on which opposites converge while remaining opposites, serves as a focus for Ettore Spalletti and Haim Steinbach. As artists, they strive to guarantee the practice and circulation of assessments that are both sensory and intellectual, banal and sublime, consumerist and mystical, material and immaterial.

Both artists apparently view the transition between images or figures of thought and sensibility as a road between a subject of pure contemplation and a profanation of its beauty. In Spalletti, this dialogue



Haim Steinbach, **one minute manager VI-1**, 1991.
Plastic-laminated wood shelf with stock pots and medicine balls.
Collection Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

between affirmation and loss becomes apparent when the rigid and absolute forms of volumes, which recall bowls and vases, discs and mobiles, encounter the powdery pigment that concretizes their exteriors. In Steinbach, the contact between banal everyday objects—outright fetishes of popular consumerism and Pop—and the primary and Minimalist shelf on which they are placed presupposes an intermediacy that is negated by these two partners in art and the language of art.

A primary and functional structure such as a vase (in Spalletti) or shelf (in Steinbach) results from a process of elementary volumetrics, whereby weight and gravity are determined by the use of solid materials. Yet in both artists' work, we also find an ephemeral and tactile presence, such as the soft and weightless chromatic dust



Donald Judd, **Untitled**, 1970.
Copper round progression.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Panza Collection.

(Spalletti), or the sequence of precarious and commonplace products and objects (Steinbach). In their work, both artists establish a *mirror-like relationship* between mutually remote and incomparable realities that are essentially different. Such a reflection allows the coexistence of different entities without favoring one over the other. The two worlds are intertwined, and the resulting art manages to exclude both good *and* evil, sacredness *and* blasphemy, chastity *and* pornography. As a result, the territory it encompasses includes, if only potentially, all the possible *topoi* of the sensible and the erotic, the tactile and the visible, the material and the mental.

Steinbach's threshold emerges from the encounter between two entities: the shelf, designed by the artist as a "memory" of reductive and Minimalist sculpture and composed of industrial materials such as



Giorgio Morandi, **Still Life**, 1919.

Oil on canvas.

Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Gift of Emilio and Maria Jesi.

formica or metal on wood; and the numerical progression of things and objects that pass from elegant to vulgar, from cold to sensual, from elitist to kitschy, from mobile to static. The plane uniting these universes is a place of discord and contrast as well as symbiosis, where a dialogue ensues between the popular sphinx of mass production and the mysterious sphinx of constructive and functional thought. The motion across a flat, immobile expanse evokes the journey and the dynamics of ghosts or people devoted to nothingness, as in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* or the wagon trains of consumers and pioneers crossing America's Great Plains.

Nevertheless, the procession of banal consumer objects is light and free: the artifacts are not fixed, and hence may be moved, touched, and seized. They pass across a heavy and static support, as if Steinbach



Ettore Spalletti,
Amphora Basin Vase, 1972.
Installation at Galleria Lucrezia de Domizio, Pescara.

wanted this mirror structure, this dialogue to reveal the constant relationships between two phenomena: an unstable art that resorts to using products and simulacra of real society, that is, consumer society; and a secure and solid art that believes in building for the future according to rules and volumes that are planned and defined *a priori*. In Steinbach, concrete phantoms, representing the frailty and vagueness, the make-believe and malaise of a transitory vision, encounter the definition of a permanence and a stability that is alive with ideas and calculations, with hypotheses of philosophy and artistic language.

Spalletti likewise constructs volumes and blocks of compact and calculated material; they are traversed not by consumer fetishes but by a homogeneous yet freely distributed impasto of color so frail and transitory that a slight touch may alter the brittle reality. Like

Steinbach's objects, the pigment—azure or gray, pink or blue—on Spalletti's vases and basins, paintings and columns may be perceived as a sensory datum, as movement and life, to be enjoyed by anyone willing to touch it.

Steinbach's juxtaposition of consumer products and primary structures has the same function as Spalletti's superimposition of pulverized pigment on pure volumes. Both techniques utilize the kinship between the "here and now" of living and the history of images that are absolute and fixed in time.

We could state that both artists flee, and yet pay homage to, formal idealism, in order to venture into the pleasure and sensuality of things or epidermises to touch and hold. Thus there is a return to the dialogue between Existence and Being, between shadow and substance, which are always connected and never at odds.

In the final analysis, the products and the soft color surface constitute a plot or narrative, an *active and mobile* destiny of seeing and touching, while the triangular shelf and the circular vase signify an *immobility* and an eternal return, a completed and reassuring story (one that recurs infinitely) of seeing and constructing in art.

To find a historical analogy, we could cite the enigma of object and painting in Giorgio Morandi's metaphysical period. For him, too, color, as powder or fresh snow, manages to form carafes and bottles—floury volumes and luminescent products. In many of his still lifes, the fluidity of the chromatic material confuses and fuses object and shelf, joggling their confines, so that the palpitation of the color suggests a transition between diverse entities. At the same time, the carafes and bottles flow through a vacuum that reveals their enchanted solitude; yet they are arranged in a linear and spatial sequence attesting to their equilibrium and their inherent absoluteness. In Morandi's work, we see a thoroughly balanced harmony of form and tone as well as a perceptual ambiguity

between object and surface, between spiritual and material elements.

This “atmosphere” is based on the rational and sensible harmonies of shapes, colors, and objects—a legacy of Piero della Francesca, Paolo Uccello, Caravaggio. These artists both reveal and conceal the object, connecting as well as distinguishing its chromatic and sculptural doubleness. In so doing, they close the gap between rational and irrational, material and immaterial.

This same contradiction is apparent in both Spalletti’s and Steinbach’s attitude toward the physical constitution of the work, which is entrusted to the sensitivity of the viewer. Both artists leave their work open to external intervention, allowing the viewer to alter the sequence of objects or the homogeneous quality of the porous surface.

Steinbach’s passage through the forest of everyday objects is a mirror image of Spalletti’s voyage through the empyrean of colors. Their weightless universes are sustained only by the ephemeral splendor and voluptuous density of their decor. Rather than an art focusing on a Platonic distinction between the “real world” and “apparent world,” we have one that widens the orbits for both worlds, exposing their opposition as a false issue. And if dualism is defunct, its absence signifies that original and copy do not exist in art, because every image refers solely to another image. Hence, the popular and consumerist, ethereal and ephemeral icon reflects the elitist and radical, concrete and stable icon, which refers to the other—neither is privileged. The point is not an affirmation, but a dissolution, of identities. Hence Steinbach and Spalletti intersect on a surface that is available to everyone and anyone because it reflects light and images—Spalletti’s monochrome surface and Steinbach’s (sometimes distorting) mirror. “I’ve always thought in terms of surface,” Steinbach told me, “of masquerading and of the outdoor skin of things. I do not think as a sculptor but as a painter. To me all the surfaces are cultural surfaces, the most interesting

aspect is the overdetermination of the object identity. The way the object presents itself, how it is dressed.”¹ Spalletti has made a corresponding statement: “On the surface I find live material: that which the work restores for me.”²

For Spalletti, color is the site for concretizing forms, as if the surface painting, with its accumulation of pigments, its brightness and luminosity, were swelling sensually and, with the thickening of the material, giving life to his vases. The same applies to Steinbach: in his oeuvre, the colors of products fluctuate on the metal and formica surfaces of his “abstract” shelves. Here, it is as if color were “placeless” and (as in Cézanne) could find its *raison d’être* solely by plunging into “things.” When color is dragged into things and forms they take the place of color. Color has become discreet, it has been annihilated by something that has abolished all values—the vase or the toy, the basin or the medicine balls.

Thus we arrive at a precarious vortex: color and surface illuminate the object, and the object concretizes the chromatic luminosity of the subject; fused and united, they permit the use and consumption of the surface as an individual and social phenomenon.

The introduction of the concept of phenomenon can take either of two guises: as the trans-sensible or trans-linguistic essence and as the body. Here too, Spalletti and Steinbach overlap in their approaches. Spalletti virtually emanates (or at least reveals) a conception of art in which painting and sculpture dissolve into a sublime being able to restrain the essence of color and form. The Italian seems to favor the sensible and the trans-sensible, so that his art becomes the home of existence in terms of the spirit and the senses or the home of all existences in human and animal terms.

For Steinbach, in contrast, the materialization of the sensible and the trans-sensible passes through the materialization of the body of the

object and of the human being. And if body is language, then language becomes body. In the exchange promoted through *Osmosis*, we detect Steinbach's focus on bodybuilding and aerobics: whether by instinct or intention, a person can turn his corporeal authenticity into an object surface, an artifact among other artifacts, an inauthentic mode adjacent to the authentic mode, a modified copy of the original. Bodybuilding, from the variety practiced by Arnold Schwarzenegger to that of Jane Fonda, transforms a body's reality into a superreality, an excess of positivity as opposed to the negativity of the normal. In remolding its limits, the body takes on a value that coincides with the marginality of objects, thwarting any human power over them. The bodybuilder thus reduces the surface of his or her body to an informational space, something purely denotative and connoting nothing, because it is absolutized and fashioned according to abstract rules. This is an idiotic aspect of social culture, which, like the foolishness of objects, should not be concealed. The desacralizing and contextualizing of any subject go together. For this reason, Steinbach refuses devotion to any subject, whether bodybuilding or mass consumerism. And if everything has the same value as everything else, the result is absolute equivalence: a museum is equal to a gymnasium or to a make-up room filled with mirrors.

But what does bodybuilding have to do with Spalletti's quest for the sublime? Both phenomena result from a delusion in dealing with reality or with culture; they both operate on the lack of a body or of a perfect, metaphysical, almost "divine" body: a situation between a lack and a gift, between that which is subtracted and that which is given. The generosity of the gift is inherent in the double and in the forgetting of reality—both of these can be rediscovered in the space of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum that has been utilized by the artists for the *Osmosis* installation. Specifically, the specular opening of the mirrored

wall behind the dumbbells is equivalent to huge medieval mosaics or the ceilings in Cinquecento homes; the latter have inspired Spalletti's paintings, which open out luminously and double the perceptible extremities of space. This same function of hallucination and illusion is created by the chromatic catharsis of his surfaces: these cracks in the sky and in heaven open their surroundings to an extraterrestrial panorama of light clouds and blank areas.

Both Spalletti and Steinbach think of their art in terms of doubleness, either as a value for opposing the world or as an instrument for molding it. Hence, on the pages of this book and in the Guggenheim, we find a close bond between mirror and chromatic surface, between water and marble, between container and content, between vase and medicine balls, between art and gymnastics: these elements are linked by a quest for perfection. The search for a self-image based on a perfect body can be placed on the same level as a sublime sculpture or painting. Both phenomena rely on the perfection of a surface or of a smooth and sculptural epidermis that is utterly without defects. In this book, the results for both artists are parallel: Steinbach has reproduced surfaces of muscles and mirrors—pictorial mimeses and watery surfaces; Spalletti gives us a sequence of photographic images of details of the marble and chromatic epidermises of his sculptures. These artists share a theoretical continuity that assumes reflection—not as a reference or a mirroring, but as a meditation on and reconsideration of the terms of seeing. Steinbach's mirror is thus the surface, just as Spalletti's painterly and sculptural surface is the mirror. In their naked reality, both exist halfway between subject and shadow, between reality and reflection.

(Translated, from the Italian, by Joachim Neugroschel.)

ETTORE SPALLETTI AND HAIM STEINBACH:
TRANSCENDENTAL EQUATIONS

NANCY SPECTOR

What is it about Ettore Spalletti's sculpture and painting that causes art critics who are usually reserved to rhapsodize about the metaphysical and the sublime, about beauty with a capital "B"? Perhaps it is their unadulterated geometric forms, which elicit a kind of Kantian aesthetic reverie from Modernists seeking a state of disinterested desire. Or perhaps it is the palette of green, azure, lavender, and salmon—suggestive of the mountainous Abruzzi region of Italy, where he lives—recalling nineteenth-century Transcendentalist artists, for whom nature symbolized the divine. Spalletti's austerity of form and tonal harmonies invoke comparisons to Italian Renaissance painting; correlations with the works of Piero della Francesca, Mantegna, and Raphael are often made. The view that Spalletti is heir to the great tradition of Italian religious art inevitably invites an analysis of the spiritual dimensions of his work. Certainly Haim Steinbach had such an approach in mind when, in correspondence concerning their forthcoming collaboration for the Guggenheim Museum's *Osmosis* exhibition, he asked Spalletti his

thoughts about Jacopo da Pontormo's painting *The Deposition from the Cross* in Santa Felicità in Florence.¹

In this collaborative context, the significance of such a question lies in the identity of the artist who posed it. If one were to identify an artist whose work seems the visual antithesis of Spalletti's refined productions—whose projects appear to challenge the metaphysical yearnings that such art summons—Steinbach would be a preeminent choice. His studied, sometimes witty, often lyrical, arrangements of objects culled from material culture appear, at first glance, seeped in the secular desires of contemporary society. While Spalletti's almost ethereal creations resonate with an aura of timelessness, Steinbach's constellations of found objects speak to the present. In isolation, Steinbach's objects appear as consumer products; digital alarm clocks, chrome wastebaskets, Halloween masks, and Alessi tea kettles have become emblems of the commodity fetishism around which the desires fueling capitalist culture circulate. But such items are also objects of exchange and thus, through association, begin to portray relationships



Ettore Spalletti, **Holy Water Basin**, 1986.
Carrara marble and water.
Collection of the artist.

between people, between cultures, between the past and the present. Inexpensive souvenirs, personal mementos, and kitsch keepsakes metonymically suggest private memories—real or imagined lost moments captured in fading but cherished objects. Similarly, cultural artifacts and folk relics communicate the notion of collective memory, but Steinbach, ever aware of the relativity of such sensibilities in our modern world, pointedly asks us to consider just whose cultural memory is being invoked. For instance, the ersatz-African stools made from elephant feet arranged on one of Steinbach's signature wedged shelves in a 1988 sculpture demonstrate the unfortunate and opportunistic ways in which "memories" of Africa have been inscribed within Western culture. The elephant skull displayed frontally on a separate shelf (forming a diptych with the foot stools) reinforces the fact that collective cultural memories are neither neutral nor benign. In Steinbach's highly conceptual art, the arrangement and juxtapositions of varied objects construct forceful narratives that describe our present value systems and cultural realities. For example, his *Untitled (guns, hats)* (1988), in which a rack of vertical rifles that seem to stand at attention is topped with a shelf of men's hats, evokes references to the rigid codes of masculinity still in place in our society.

If Spalletti is viewed as a contemporary Rothko, who creates classically abstract works with metaphysical associations, Steinbach is a present-day Warhol, who unabashedly holds a mirror to our civilization. However, to make such a dialectical analogy and define these artists solely through opposition is an overly simplistic gesture that dismisses other more complementary dimensions of their projects. Another way to perceive the two artists' work emerges when reconsidering Steinbach's inquiry about the relevance of Pontormo's painting to Spalletti's aesthetic convictions. In response to Steinbach's allusion to the tradition of Italian devotional art, Spalletti said that he often visited the painting



Haim Steinbach, **Untitled (elephant foot stools, elephant skull)** (details), 1988.
Plastic-laminated wood shelves with objects. Courtesy Sonnabend Gallery and
Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York.

and commented on the beauty of Pontormo's diaries. He recounted that Pontormo once dined with Bronzino and together "they ate a herring."² This brief exchange between the artists—Steinbach introduced a religious image as a topic for discussion and Spalletti described a culinary event—provides some clues to a reading of their work.

Spalletti's reference to the shared herring can be seen as an invitation to read his work together with Steinbach's, to mix things up a bit, to play with meaning. If, in this collaborative dialogue, Steinbach is going to ask him about the spiritual arena, Spalletti is going to talk about the carnal. The goal then is to discover where in their work these two different realms—the metaphysical and the empirical—collide. Pontormo's and Bronzino's communal meal thus becomes a metaphor for the exchange between Steinbach and Spalletti, a metaphor for the points of intersection in their art. To extend this metaphor, the herring itself takes on dual connotations: it may be read as both the early Christian symbol for Jesus Christ and a simple seafood dish. In following this double thread we may then ask, what in Steinbach's art invokes the transcendent and, conversely, what in Spalletti's entertains the corporeal.



Haim Steinbach, **Untitled (guns, hats)**,
1988. English brown oak veneered wood box
with objects. Private Collection, Belgium.

While the theory that abstract sculpture emulates the body is hardly new, Spalletti's work adds a few unexpected twists to the concept. In addition to its verticality, three-dimensionality, and existence in time, Spalletti's sculpture has a delicate skin of powdered pigment, which seems as permeable as the human body. The sculptural surface is thereby transformed from a rigid, geometric container to a seemingly malleable substance; contours soften and the works appear to breathe. Spalletti amplifies his play with the anthropomorphic qualities of abstract form in the cover photograph of the catalogue for his recent retrospective at IVAM (Institut Valencià d'Art Modern). In the image, the artist is shown sprinkling water onto a small sculpture as if trying to make it grow. In fact, the sculpture does have the capacity to absorb water and, according to Spalletti, it gradually changes and "exudes"



Ettore Spalletti, **Vase**, 1981. Photograph.

color with the addition of moisture.³ The organic properties of the work aside, what is most intriguing about the photograph is that the image of the artist's body is severely cropped to look like a column, a second sculptural form. With this photograph, Spalletti dissolves the boundaries between body and sculpture, between the creative act and the work itself.

Spalletti's simulated transformation into an aesthetic object recalls the legacy of another Italian artist, Piero Manzoni. On a formal level, Spalletti's monochrome canvases testify to his cognizance of Manzoni's all-white *achromes* of the late 1950s, but the artists share a deeper, more conceptual, connection. Both of their oeuvres appear informed by a conviction that the traditional distinction between art and life is erroneous and has only served to perpetuate cultural doctrines that privilege the utopian over the empirical. To illustrate this point, Manzoni infused his art with the presence of his own body—filling and distributing balloons as quantities of *Fiato d'artista* (Artist's breath) and

canning his own excrement to be sold as *Merda d'artista* (Artist's shit). At the same time, however, and quite intentionally, his quixotic gestures evoked connotations of the spiritual. According to Germano Celant, Manzoni metaphorically extended what he construed to be the aesthetic potential of his own being to the masses by signing other people's bodies and proclaiming them *Sculture vivente* (Living sculptures).⁴ But as with the reception of Spalletti's art, exclusively religious interpretations are often proffered instead of readings that capture the critical, even parodic, dimension of the work. When, for example, Manzoni distributed hard-boiled eggs marked with his thumbprint for consumption at a gallery opening in 1960, his action was compared to Christian communion.⁵ The deliberate provocation inherent to Manzoni's actions went largely unnoticed. Few, if any, critics questioned the economic and cultural implications of an artist claiming the products of his own body as art. No one acknowledged Manzoni's investigation of the artist's relation to his or her own means of production and of the art world's conflation of aesthetic value and exchange value (aspects of the work which are astutely reflected in Steinbach's practices today). And most noticeably, no one commented upon the remarkable humor informing Manzoni's oeuvre.

Spalletti, too, effects a curious blend of the religious and the corporeal, and not without a touch of sly humor. While alluding through conventional formal devices to the transcendental, Spalletti simultaneously reminds us that his work is actually embedded in the body. In addition to ingeniously weaving his own person into the work through photographic references, the artist creates sculptural surface coverings so fragile that the touch of a human hand can completely mar their visual integrity. What appear to be the abstract sculptural essences of immortality, are, in essence, highly vulnerable entities. By imbuing these sumptuous forms with a human (i.e. temporal) presence, Spalletti

metaphorically unites the sensual and the supersensual realms. What, after all, is transcendence but basic human striving to overcome adversity, to broaden boundaries, to seek inspiration? The search for transcendence is a perpetual process that comes not from above but from within.

Steinbach's work also challenges Western culture's conventional dichotomy between the aesthetic object and lived experience. When paraded across shelves or placed in armoires, his found objects do not acquire the status of Duchampian "ready-mades" merely by assuming the stance of displayable art in a gallery or museum context. Instead, Steinbach's objects persist as objects, stubbornly maintaining their empirical connection to the "real" world and adamantly describing their place within it. However, this does not mean that these highly premeditated selections of objects lack aesthetic value or a certain poetry. Like Proust's madeleine, a singular familiar item can elicit a flood of associations, memories, and desires. Or as architect Adolf Loos once remarked, "every piece of furniture, every thing, every object ha[s] a story to tell, a family story."⁶ In a number of Steinbach's sculptures, the narrative revolves around issues of the body, ranging from personal hygiene—toilet brushes shown with laundry bins—to physical strength. Medicine balls, mirrors, and barbells populate many of the recent works in reference to a particularly American obsession with the body beautiful. In this way, Steinbach's project also refers to Manzoni's interest in the corporeal dimension and ventures a similar fusion of art and life. Whereas the Italian artist used mundane items—such as balloons, cans, and eggs—to contain and convey bodily products, Steinbach's objects are inanimate props that indicate bodily presence.

The exercise equipment and expansive mirrors used in Steinbach's sculptures may be considered as surrogates for the people who utilize them in their quest for physical perfection. The cold metal armatures of

the Nautilus machines embody the desire that drives gym patrons in search of steel-hard muscles, boundless stamina, and super-human strength. In contemporary American culture, this zealous pursuit for the ultimate physique can be understood as a crusade for personal transformation or transcendence. The concept of transcendence has been secularized in the modern world and there now exists a panoply of ways to reach nirvana. Tele-evangelism offers spiritual transport in the privacy of one's own living room, while "religious" experiences have been known to occur in aerobics class or at rock concerts, through mind-altering drugs, or even hang-gliding. Steinbach illustrates this cultural phenomenon with insight and humor in his 1987 installation *Spirit I*. Comprised of two brand-new, gleaming, freestanding universal weight-lifting machines and thirty-six lava lamps on a three-tiered chrome shelving unit, the work symbolizes contrasting methods employed in the contemporary search for individual revelation. Lava lamps, favorite 1960s decorator items, are better remembered today as props for drug-induced, hallucinatory experiences, as designer furniture for the LSD generation. The ever-floating, ever-mutating forms in the illuminated belly of these lamps have come, like black-light posters, love beads, and incense, to represent a time in the not-so-distant past when psychedelic drugs were equated with spiritual elevation. The Nautilus machines—stream-lined exercise equipment designed to pump and flex every muscle—represent the current mania for physical perfection. In our culture, the lean, well-toned physique has come to signify absolute mastery over the body. This intoxication with control comes with moral implications: the ability to overcome all physical obstacles and appetites is lauded as exemplary behavior. And the rewards for such self-denial? The capacity to re-shape one's anatomy and attain the appearance of eternal youth. If people cannot determine their ultimate destiny, at least they can look good. The feelings of achievement and invulnerability



Haim Steinbach, **Spirit I**, 1987. Exercise machines, chrome-laminated wood shelf with lava lamps. Collection capc Musée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux.

thus gained are, for many today, the ultimate goal—corporeal transcendence with an eye toward immortality.

Steinbach's *Spirit I*, with its allusions to secular modes of physical and mental transcendence, embodies the dualism inherent to our Judeo-Christian heritage. United in one installation, the exercise apparatus and the lava lamps symbolize the bifurcation of human existence into two discrete, but interrelated, realms: the bodily or carnal on one hand, and the cerebral or spiritual on the other. Throughout the philosophic and religious traditions of the Western world, the physical domain has invariably been construed as the great impediment to spiritual evolution: desires of the flesh have been considered enemies of the soul, and bodily weaknesses such as illness, fatigue, and hunger have been seen as distractions for the mind. The traditional path toward transcendence, therefore, has necessitated that the body be conquered and subdued in order to secure the unhindered development of the soul.

This division between body and mind is, in essence, a dialectic,

since one realm cannot function without the other. The struggle between the physical and the mental, between the carnal and the spiritual, between life and the hope for immortality, is fundamental to being human. In both Spalletti's flirtation with the corporeal and the sublime, and Steinbach's engagement with Western dualism, transcendence is not an absolute state, but rather a process that requires a simultaneous respect for the physical and appreciation of the mental. It is at this triangulated point—the delicate configuration of body, mind, and the search for transcendence—where Steinbach's and Spalletti's works converge. While neither artist is making claims to the transcendental—Spalletti plays with it as a visual trope in art and Steinbach illustrates its current cultural manifestations—they both insist on the centrality of the body to any spiritual or aesthetic pursuit.

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1. Letter from Haim Steinbach to Ettore Spalletti, July 15, 1992.
 2. Letter from Ettore Spalletti to Haim Steinbach, July 26, 1992.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. Germano Celant, *Piero Manzoni*, trans. Malcom Skey, New York and Paris, Sonnabend Press, 1972, p. 11.
 5. Jan van der Marck, "Piero Manzoni: An Exemplary Life," *Art in America* 61 (May 1973), pp. 74-81.
 6. Quoted in Beatriz Colomina, "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism," ed. Beatriz Colomina, *Sexuality and Space*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, p. 83, footnote 14.























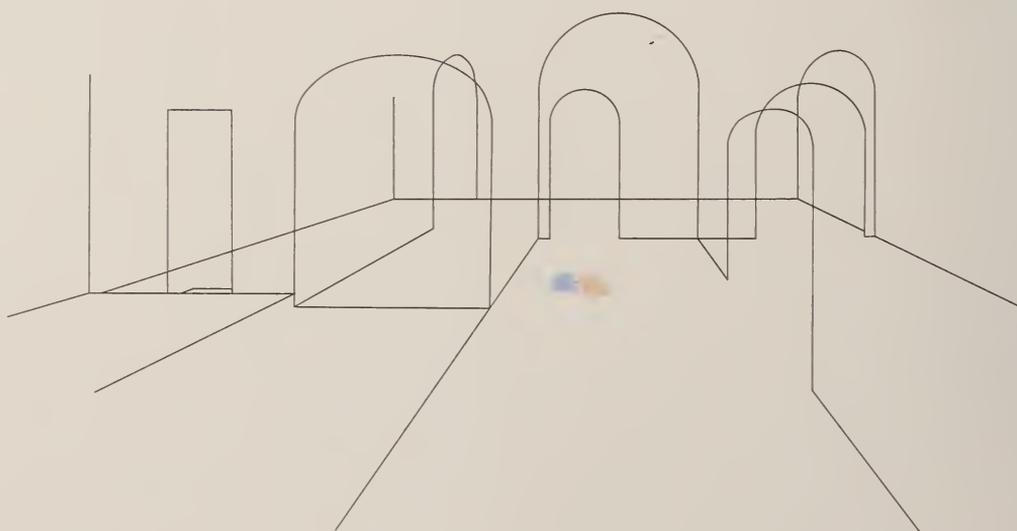








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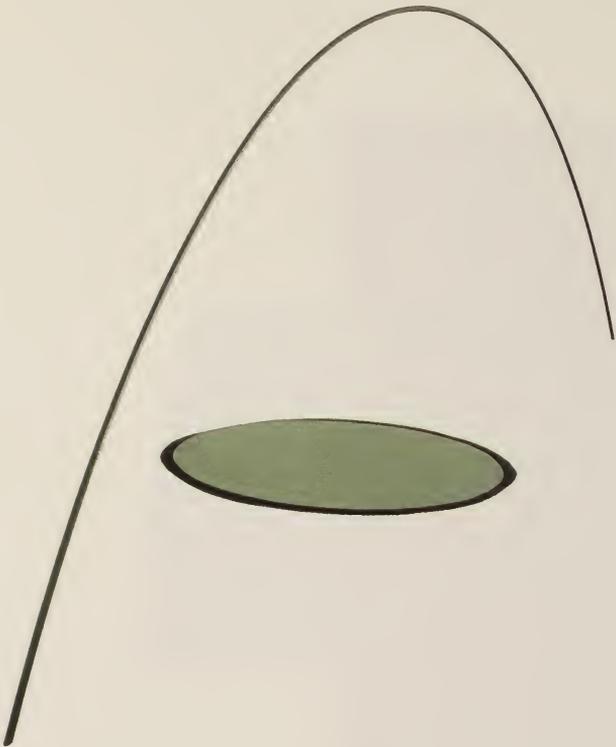


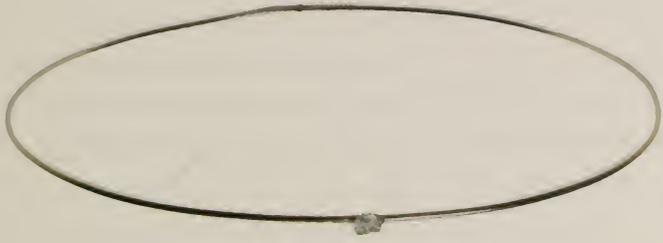












ETTORE SPALLETTI AND HAIM STEINBACH:
A CONVERSATION

GERMANO CELANT

Germano Celant brought Ettore Spalletti and Haim Steinbach together in Italy on August 31 and September 1, 1992 to discuss the Osmosis installation and this publication. In the process of developing their collaborative ideas, they raised the issue of the relation of the body to touch, vulnerability, and desire. They also discussed the points of contact between such disparate subjects as Michelangelo and cosmetics, armoires and ergonomics, Mannerist sculpture and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

GERMANO CELANT Since your plans for this collaborative installation involve embedding mirrors in the walls, a viewer will see reflections of her or his own body in the same space with the objects you create for the exhibition. What do you think is the relationship between these two experiences?

ETTORE SPALLETTI What I have in mind is the image of paintings on the walls and sculptures on the floor plane. And there will be a third image, that reflected in the mirror. We will have two exhibitions: a real one, and one inside the illusory depth of the mirror.

HAIM STEINBACH The mirror and the objects are reflective forms of our own invention. The large mirror is traversed by a hanging chrome rack with a row of dumbbells. Both are there for the body to interact with physically and perceptually. The mirror also refers to tangibility, if only by the mere fact of the intangibility of the reflected image. It invites a psychological-spatial response as well as a desire for touching. Identification with the circular and the elliptical distorting mirrors is less direct. The recognition of an aberration of surface invites you to say, “wait a minute, that’s not a normal mirror, what is it?”—so you sort of want to go over and you end up looking at yourself.

E.S. Notice that the elliptical mirror has a proportion similar to that of the body.

H.S. And like the mirror, the gessoed pigment on Ettore’s work invites you to touch it.

G.C. Ettore, I am interested in this tactile aspect of your work. You have said that Arte Povera was important for the ability it gave art to occupy space in a sensitive rather than a rational way. The material has always been touchable, has always been activated in a visual way.

E.S. The material itself is unchanging. When the material is touched by the artist, it comes to inform us of something else.

Then it is fixed.

At that moment neither the material nor the color can go back to their place of origin because they have become something else. The oil paint cannot go back into the tube.

G.C. The artist always has an interest in emphasizing the concrete language of things. As with their spatial poetry, it is difficult for an art work to proceed *backwards*, to go back to the zero point of the materials; the Dadaist tradition, however, did posit this doubt, of signs moving freely in the whole with no limit. A distinction is in fact noticeable between your work and that of the historical avant-garde, precisely in its

difference of attitude. Haim looks to Duchamp, whereas Spalletti turns his gaze to Morandi: both “painted” everyday objects (that is, they inserted them into painting).

E.S. I like to think that my work retains the wholeness of the moment in which I made it. I would like it to remain new, untouched by the taste of time.

Before they decided to restore it, the Sistine Chapel was dirty, and everyone still believed that that really was the color that Michelangelo wanted it to be. I climbed up the scaffolding one day to see the cleaning close up, and the color revealed to me was very striking. The image I had was of many bowls of color, of yellow, blue, indigo. Of color inside glass containers that gave me a vision of something in full relief, of a color that immediately afterward moved onto the ceiling in the same full roundness.

G.C. The other night we were talking about the degeneration of the body. If someone touches the seductive skin of your work, it mars the powdery surface and the surface must be re-sanded. So is it possible to preserve the work as it appeared in the moment of its creation?

E.S. When they ask me to restore a work, I can never really figure out the exact moment of its creation; I tend to superimpose on this moment another moment.

Before, Haim asked me about face lifts, preserving an appearance in the most expressive generosity of our being. I prefer real cosmetics, those that don't allow themselves to be discovered.

G.C. Everybody is interested in keeping the momentum of the productive age—beauty, youth, etc. Keeping this kind of productive image means that you don't emphasize every moment of your life. You just start to extend certain elements. A painting is produced in a certain moment in time, in a context, and doesn't have this kind of life, this kind of change of energy, because it represents an extreme point of

energy at a certain moment in history. So it's perhaps difficult to accept that this energy can be changed in time, or if you do accept that it's no longer part of the piece, it's just a change or manipulation of the piece.

H.S. The seductive surfaces of Ettore's sculptures call for the potential for rapid degeneration of the work, given the possibility that the gessoed and powdered surfaces may be touched.

G.C. If you are inviting interaction, that doesn't necessarily mean that you don't want to maintain the inherent qualities of the work.

H.S. Nonetheless it's a potential in the work, and it may happen.

G.C. The pieces invite one to cultivate sensitivity about what is fragile. If you offer certain tactile elements, you are not necessarily inviting destruction. You can perhaps invite a positive, not a negative, attitude to the work.

H.S. I think that the fragile element requires sensitivity and care, but it also is a manifestation of vulnerability. When you talk about the body and the references of physical reality, there is also the aspect of its fragility, its vulnerability, and its ephemerality, which is another reference to Ettore's work. But there is also materiality and the degeneration, the death—in terms of disappearance, obsolescence, dysfunction, or damage—of material things.

G.C. Don't you think your work has the same kind of fragility? In your work, there is the potential to touch, but there is also a distancing that results from the shelf or pedestal. I see then that both your attitudes are similar: there is ephemerality, because the work can be destroyed—if you break a vase, you can replace it, just as you can restore Ettore's varnished surface.

H.S. You can't always replace the objects in my work.

G.C. Yes, sometimes they are unique or historical. So then there is a transformation, because as soon as I move the installation over by an inch, or I replace a gray cup with a white one, I have a different meaning

. . . so it seems to me that both of you are dealing with a sort of dualism or dialectical situation that is there, but which could disappear. You are proposing a vulnerability, but a vulnerability that is aggressive. When you break or touch an object, you feel guilty. Vulnerability becomes an issue of respect and sensitivity. I see both ideas on the same die.

H.S. But though you may think positively about these things, the issue of the disintegration of the work is an issue of the reality of objects. The focus in my work is not the new; the work also extends to old objects, and to objects that have been damaged—they may be aging, aged, disintegrating, or disintegrated, but they are objects nonetheless—they may have or have had an ideal reality at one point . . . it was a machine that worked, an object that was a vibrant orange that happened to be made of plastic, that got left out in the sun and lost its original color. That doesn't mean that the object has stopped living; its life has taken on a new reality.

G.C. Yes, but the difference is we're not talking about the deterioration of individual objects, we're talking about what happens when we manipulate the configuration of the objects.

H.S. Well, in my work, I put the pieces like pieces in a chess game and I say, this is the order. The institution where the works are installed protects the work, because it needs it. Too much touching or handling destroys the work. But since the work involves selection and arrangement, since the collector becomes an accomplice in the act of arranging, the viewer, too, is implicated in this interaction.

I understand the ideological side of what Errone is doing. I understand and respect it. But I think that he has built into his work the problem of maintenance. Even if no one touched the work, even if everyone venerated and respected it, it would have to stay in one place and never be moved because the minute someone acquires it, they have to touch it to move it, and so the surface must be violated. In my work

people have to place the objects and follow my instructions, but they may miss doing so and that's a problem, but it's also a *problematic* of the work. I made a conscious choice not to glue or bolt the objects to the shelf or box to which they are assigned.

E.S. The problem of tactility is fundamental, and I feel very strongly about it with respect to my work. But the tactile cannot always be resolved with touch itself, just as not all expressions of desire can really be lived.

G.C. But you have to respect the desire of the "other."

E.S. The fact of desire being lived as something always legitimate is a profoundly materialistic notion. What I see as being really materialistic is the desire to touch and discover everything. I like the idea of a surface expressing a strong tactile desire, and at the same time I like to discover that it is possible to live this desire in the very restraining of action, in the impossibility of realizing the desire itself.

H.S. We are talking about the construction of desire's physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects. It consists of possibilities and impossibilities as well as allowances and disallowances. Also there is appreciation and lack of appreciation, sophistication and lack of sophistication, culture and lack of culture, civilization and lack of civilization. Children, at first, have more liberty to have all kinds of sensual experiences; they are allowed to touch. Then they are allowed to touch but not to hit. Later on, they're not allowed to touch anymore. The social being becomes more self-controlled in relation to touching and interaction, as well as to erotic desire and its expression. Then society changes the terms and there is a bit more tolerance. That doesn't mean that because there's more tolerance it all becomes materialistic—it may be an art. Dancing involves touching but it's an expression, not materialism. Touching a surface doesn't have to be materialistic.

E.S. A nude painted by Titian comes to mind.

G.C. Desire is the secret lymph that fuses the high with the low, the periphery with the center, the spirit with the body: it represents the feverish pulse toward the “other.” There are varying degrees of contact or even seduction, but these are always bound to a body that is not possessed. In the case of the overflow of objects of consumption one may speak of a fragmented body that cannot be pieced back together. The strength of the desire to possess them makes it clear that the person is a nonunified combination of elements. Thus the consumer seeks the means to satisfy the eyes, the sex organs, the ears, the nose, the mouth. There is, on the other hand, an attempt to possess a body that cannot be possessed: i.e., one’s own body, as “designed” by body building. In this case desire is bound to a “poorly built” entity, a body that people want to bring back to the dissection table, to free it from excess and deformation. Here the transubstantiation of Titian’s *Venus* coincides with the rebuilding of a Schwarzenegger in a reconstituted body. The new being is the being that mirrors itself, like the witch in *Snow White*, in order to emerge as the new technological Narcissus, purified of all dross and all error.

H.S. This concept brings back the idea of narcissism, which has to do with the preservation of youth and beauty. It consists of historically cultural conditions. You have beauty parlors, hairdressers, physical-fitness programs, clubs . . . all are part of the desire to maintain the integrity of health and beauty. One way that we maintain this desirable condition is by looking in the mirror. You look at your body and how it’s developing. You are involved with its upkeep, fighting against time, fighting against aging.

E.S. I’m not too sure how fitness culture can construct a body; rather, it manages quite well to shape it. When I saw an image of Ben Johnson, I was struck by the power that his body expressed. I think it is this aspect that modern society is in some way trying to imitate.

Ironically, although he created a model figure of the contemporary athlete, he was immediately punished for it.

H.S. Ben Johnson is also a symbol of the body's overcoming time or distance. Steroids are the technical aspect of the transformation of bodies, as opposed to the ideology of the body as an organic, natural whole. Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator* represents a body that is a synthesis of the organic and the inorganic.

G.C. The idea of a supreme, sublime body becoming pure through a process of gradual rarefaction is recognizable over the course of art history, from Phidias to Canova, from Classicism to Neoclassicism. The attempt at artistic mimesis has always been an attempt to transform human presence into concept, passion into idea. To sculpt the pure body, at the limit of its unnatural beauty. The perfect blend of gesture and material in Canova inspires the balance of pigment (*polvere di colore*) and volume in Spalletti, yet it likewise informs the industrial assemblage in *The Terminator* and the liquification of the character in *Total Recall*. The subject is always the metaphysical body when the skin is a surface of marble or platinum, an extremely vital body that expropriates life. It is the same duality that one finds in the dialogue between objects of consumption and the minimalist structure in Haim, or in the dialectic between the active, light material (the pigment) and the passive heavy form (the vases and bowls) in Ettore's work. Poetry lies in the double, in the mirror as in the water, in the surface and in the objects to be touched, entities in which our bodies are reflected.

E.S. I can only say that when I see a body sculpted by Canova I recognize a quality that I had never previously seen, not on the street nor on the beach—nowhere around me, in short. Not a progression, but an invention. It was certainly an intimate nature, a private desire that Canova possessed, an inner vision and image all his own, and he was able to offer it to all, to let everyone see it. In this way, different

expressions of the body always represent different realities. These realities are true constructions. I very much like Paul Valéry's saying, "The skin is deepest," because I tend to think—given my physical inactivity, among other things—that the beauty of the body is also achieved from the inside out. Of course the body of a great athlete is also beautiful; these are two different ideas.

G.C. Do you see your work, in some sense, as figurative sculpture?

E.S. I try to make color be a figurative imagining; oftentimes I hear my work described with expressions of a figurative nature. I use the color pink with flesh in mind.

G.C. Is your color a kind of skin?

E.S. I do not think of color as surface color. A painting painted in oils lacks the ability to absorb; the colored matter can only thicken outwardly. In the end you might also think of overturning the palette onto the surface of the canvas.

For this exhibition I am thinking of the mirror that Haim uses and I think of it inside the reflection containing the color of the mirror, a color ranging from silver to mercury. That is my vision. Through the mirror, through the reflection of color in the mirror, we should find a different volume. I think of the objects used in physical culture, the chrome weights that will be reflected; perhaps all will become like water. I had considered building a little fountain that would spout a jet of vodka.

H.S. Speaking of a fountain, you know that water doesn't fall in a lump, but has a different dynamic with respect to gravity from static objects. And the body is some ninety percent water. So I'd like to talk about how gravity relates to the bodies you create. With this sort of sculpture especially there is a play on gravity. If you have a cone that goes up in reverse and is heavier on top than on the bottom, it bears on a certain kind of lifting or coming down, it has to do with the bottom

and the top. It concerns a point of contact with the ground in relation to gravity. Then it brings to mind ideas about weightlessness and movement; you even have a reference to a flying saucer in one of your sculptures.

The tradition of Italian Mannerism has to do with gravity. In Pontormo's *Deposition from the Cross* they lower Christ's body and you see and can almost feel how they're holding it. That's about gravity, that's about taking the body down from the cross and the weight of it and how it falls in people's arms. A medicine ball is also about gravity. I'm interested in how these contemporary technological references, like flying saucers and medicine balls, overlap with the tradition of Christian iconography of spiritual transcendence.

G.C. In your sculpture/paintings the shelf contains and sustains the event. It is like a space that grinds and gives birth, generates and elicits tenderness and cruelty, irony and tragedy, intimacy and impetuosity—a horizontal, pregnant womb engendering the breath of the everyday: the substances and relations between life, both private and social, and things.

H.S. When I started building these shelves, I was thinking about them in terms of architecture and in terms of objects as being the modifiers, the translators, the mediators by which we understand space socially, institutionally, artistically. Similarly, in my work *Untitled (French walnut armoire, Cuban mahogany armoire)* an architectural reference is present. These very large armoires from the eighteenth century were made for the big rooms of the châteaux of the aristocracy. They were meant to play with the scale of the rooms. They were about spaces within spaces as well as the affirmation of mass and gravity. And yet they were lightened up by the ornate curves of their fringes.

Of course, the shelf unit is very different psychologically than the cabinet or the closet. In the cabinet, the situation is always one of

protruding from the wall into one's space.

G.C. The shelf allows you to move and permute objects, whereas these massive box-like containers imply a different weight in society, an occupational space, a symbolic implication of space.

H.S. The position of the viewer in his space in relationship to the object.

G.C. In a certain way the armoire is something that controls you. You have to go up to it. You cannot bring it with you.

H.S. Exactly. There's a sociological and psychological language that has to do with one's mobility in space, with the proximity or distance regarding people and objects.

G.C. It has to do with territory.

H.S. Yes, territory and boundaries regarding self and possessions as well as use of and interaction with objects.

G.C. Ergonomics—when they study how the configuration of benches at school affects the way children relate to each other and form groups.

H.S. And it relates to my interests in institutions, in the institutions in which objects exist, or the institutions that make them be what they are or the institutions that they make because of what they have become.

G.C. Let's discuss the dialogue between this construction—the shelf—and the selection of objects, which is a different attitude. It's an important point, because in your work and in Ettore's there is a similar system. There is a construction that you control, and a construction that can be touched. For Ettore, there is a form that is a pedestal, a base, on which there is pigment. For you, the shelf is a pedestal to display your sensitivities, a dialogue or analogy of sensitivity.

H.S. I work with formal, material, and sensory issues, mediums that are used to convey messages conceptually and visually. At a certain

point, I wanted to throw myself into the world, to enter the realm of improbabilities, risk, and insecurity. If my medium is paint and a brush, I have a certain control. But if I throw myself into the world of objects, and say anything is allowed, any arrangement, then it is chaotic and confusing . . . where is my artistic control? So I have to give myself some kind of an anchor, some kind of a set-up. I have to make a structure within which I can introduce, direct, organize the unstable object. I wanted to find a way to employ formal devices in order to elaborate on the social reality inherent in objects. I invented the shelf in the way that someone invented the tuba. The tuba can't play like a violin, but it has certain flexibilities, and within those flexibilities one can make certain emphases to create a sense of time, a sense of empathy. My shelf becomes an instrument that has absolute structural and aesthetic parameters. I use that instrument in order to emphasize and de-emphasize different aspects of the objects. The objects are highlighted; correspondences between elements of their design and shape are underscored. I want to make their surfaces and skins talk, exposing their contents and their relations.

G.C. How about your selection of objects? Take, for example, the piece with the wooden shoes. Are you satisfied by the way the artisan has done this object for you? Did you commission it or did you find it?

H.S. I bought them from this guy here in Venice. These wooden boots are not necessarily my ideal standard of beauty nor Ettore's, I assume. These are not two boots carved by Canova, either. This work is about the relativity of desire and standards of beauty other than the artist's.

G.C. Ettore, if your forms are pedestals for color, where do your choices of color come from?

E.S. I get up in the morning and go into my studio; I don't know what to do, so I stroll through my work, suddenly stopping in surprise

at the sequentiality of forms and colors: "I don't like that pink so close there, so I move it and put a neutral gray in its place, then a cobalt blue, an ultramarine, then a Prussian blue." I am in the studio; only a faint light indicates the outside to me. I don't like the idea of work in art; I prefer the idea of a painting that appears miraculously. When it succeeds.

For the collaboration, I had the idea of constructing a large tub. I thought of medicinal flasks, and of how to pour water into the tub; I thought of the work in entirely chromatic terms, charcoal black for the tub, leather black for the medicinal flasks; and I thought of these colors in relation to all the others, so as to be able to present a great fresco, and another one on top of this, which would appear frozen in the mirror's reflection. On the real surfaces, the pigments, through abrasion, are fragmented once again. In the apparition there is no notion of soft or hard; one is as though enfolded in an atmosphere of color: chalk white, coal black, earthen brown, sky blue, flesh pink.

G.C. You describe form as enfolded in color, yet many of the forms themselves resemble containers: vases, pots, bowls. There is thus a dialogue between container and contained, between full and empty.

H.S. Like Ettore's forms, a mirror may evoke a blue surface that could be empty or full, like an ocean. A black well has the same ambiguity. I see Ettore as filling up minimalist forms with evocative spaces, with sensuality. It could be a response to twentieth-century gridded cities and their highly rationalized forms.

E.S. I do not complement, as Haim says, minimal forms with sensuality; I fill the surface of the panel with drawing and color, or else I roll the panel until I have a vase or a column. I have always imagined a long wall on which I would place all my work, one piece after another: a great fresco, a great landscape. I think of Minimalist art when I look at photos of my work. A photograph gives me something different; I prefer

black and white.

H.S. To the extent that we both use primary geometric forms, however, I think it has to do with a response to our high-tech, mass-production, functional era. We have a shared yearning to engage these forms on our terms. This show is about that sort of criticism. Ettore's and my work have a critical dialectic with reductive and minimalist ideas. Despite talk of objects, there may be no objects, just paradigms of objects.

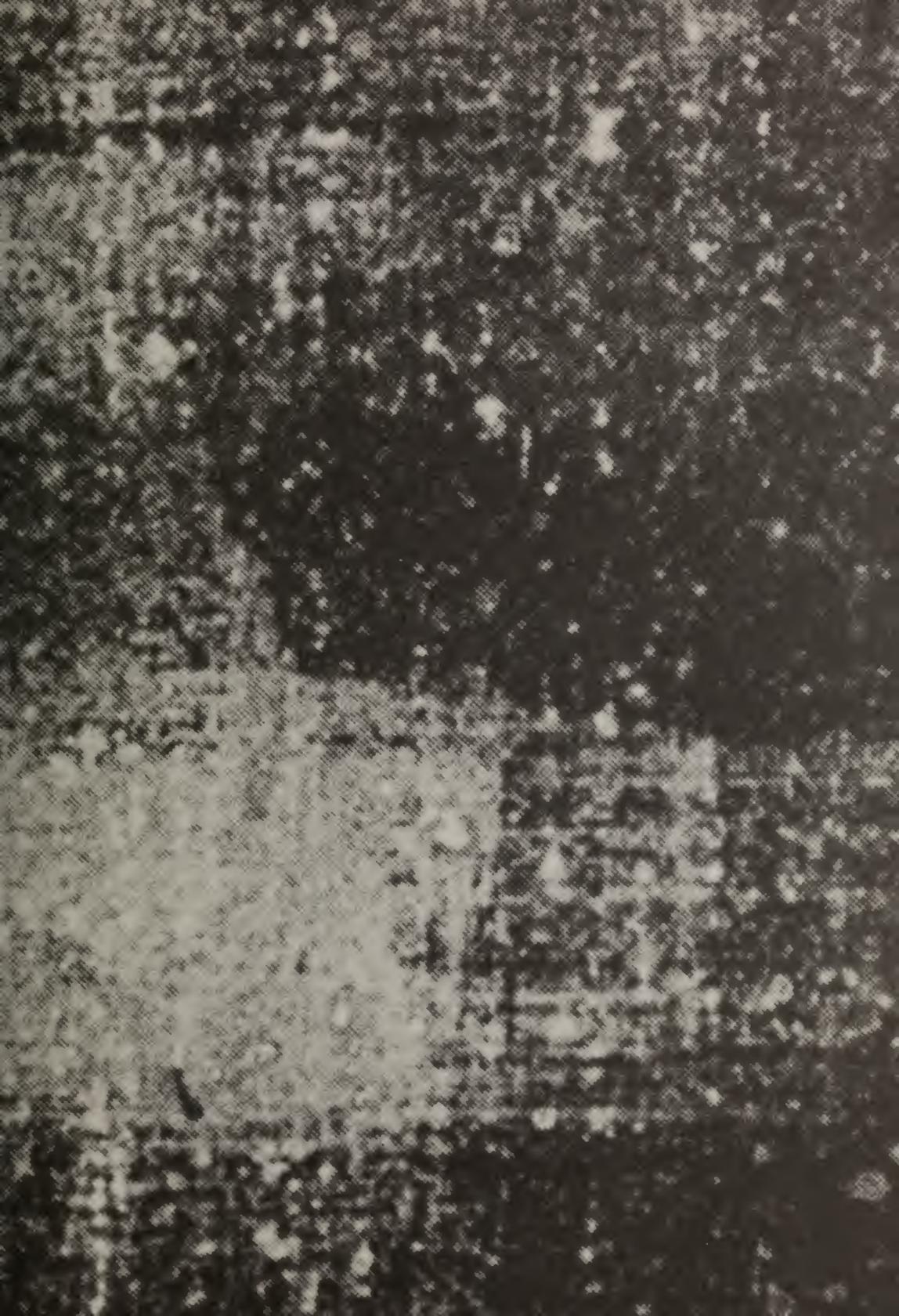
G.C. Ettore, do you think of your works as objects?

E.S. I always refer to my works as paintings or sculptures. The eternal form of the panel encloses, as it always has for me, the inner content. Inside is the figurative imagination that the fragmentation of the pigment produces in the desire for an atmosphere, for an atmospheric image. . . . We're in Venice, I'm thinking of San Marco, an amazing place, or of Piazza dei Miracoli in Pisa, the cathedral square: to look at those "objects" placed on the grass and then to think that de Chirico's little painting with the tower is as big as that piazza.

(Germano Celant's and Ettore Spalletti's portions were translated, from the Italian, by Stephen Sartarelli. This conversation was edited by Jon Ippolito.)







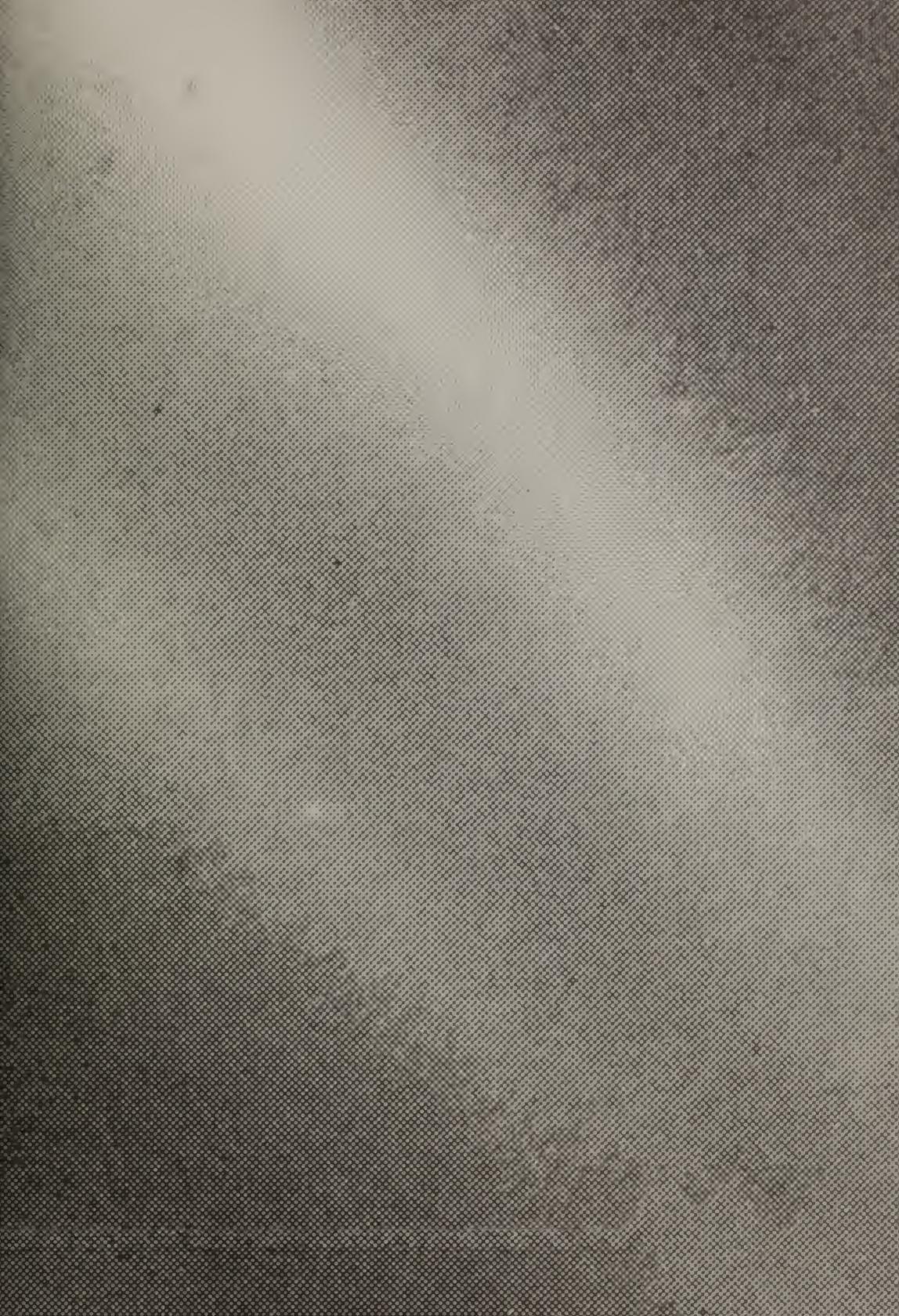






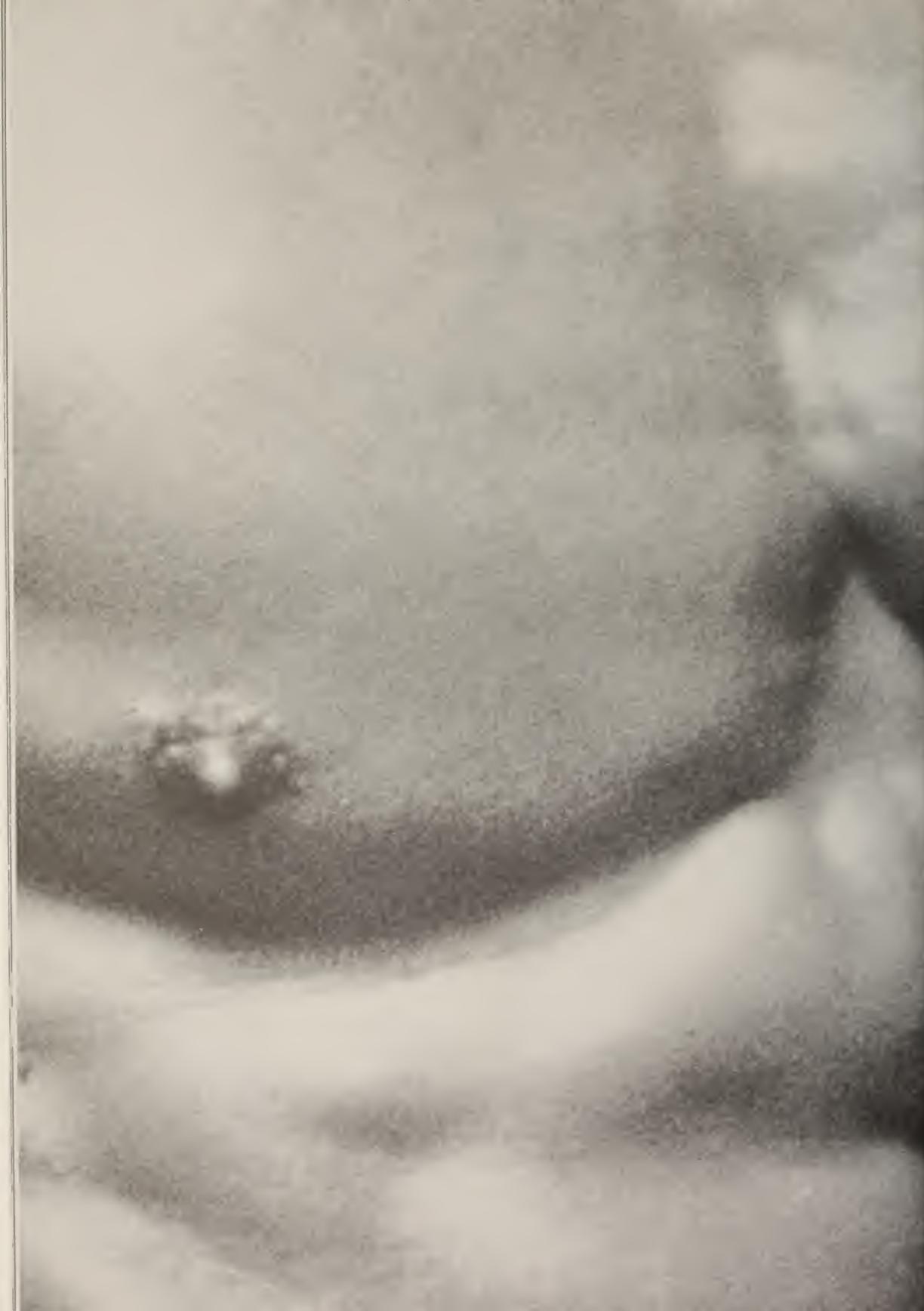












Muscle.

Beach.











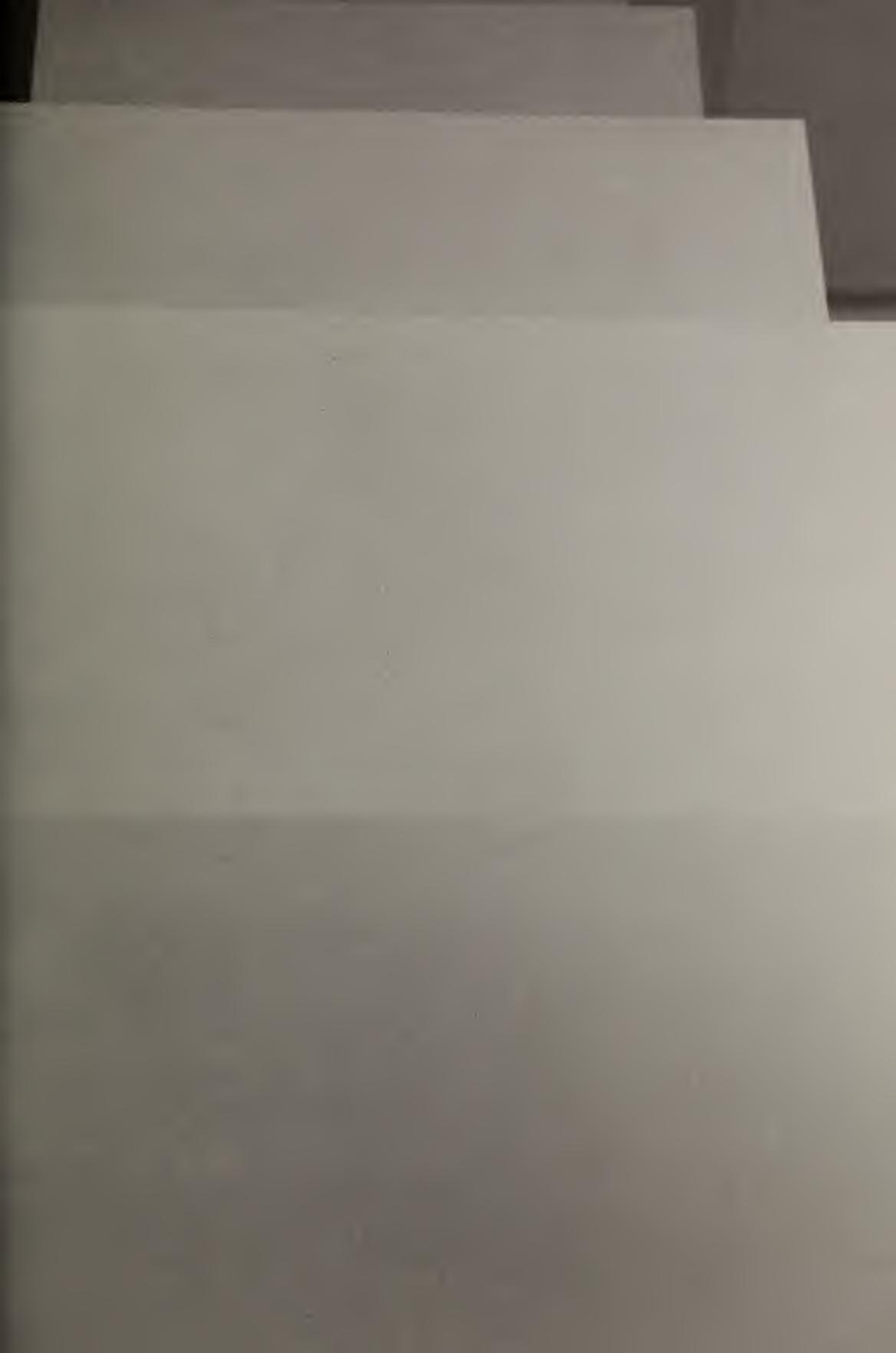


















SUGGESTED READINGS

Ettore Spalletti

Brouwer, Marianne. "Ettore Spalletti." *De Appel* 2 (1989-90), pp. 8-11.

Celant, Germano. "Ettore Spalletti's Archipelago of Colours." *Artforum* 25, no. 2 (Oct. 1986), pp. 90-92.

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Haim Steinbach

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Steinbach, Haim. "Joy of Tapping Our Feet." *Parkett* 14 (Nov. 1987), p. 16.

O S M O S I S

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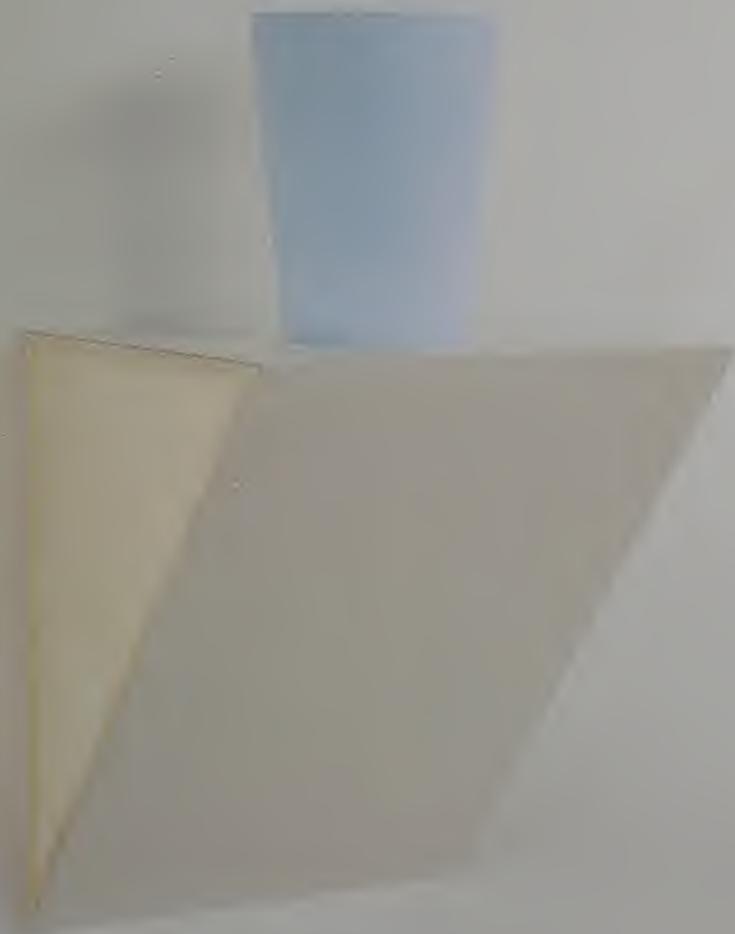
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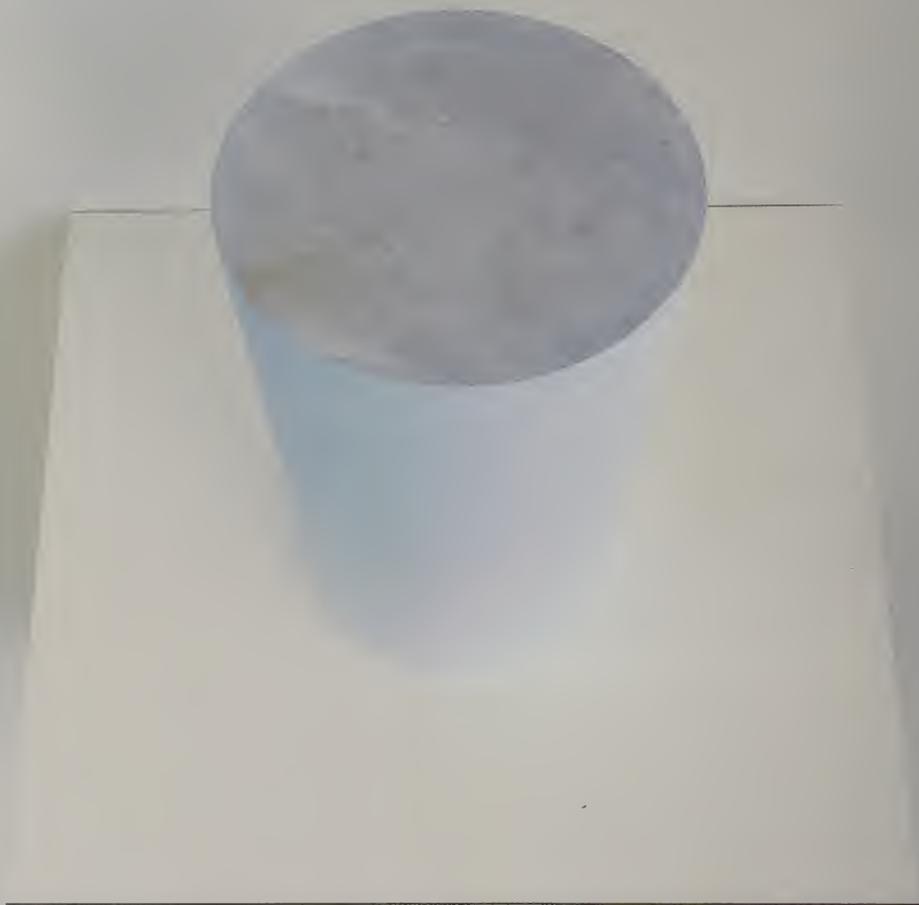
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OSMOSIS

Ettore Spalletti • Haim Steinbach

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