

# Folds in the Fabric: Robert Morris in the 1980s\*

KEVIN LOTERY

*Nothing to do with a corpus: only some bodies.*

—Roland Barthes

*Artificer of the Uncreative*

By January of 1983, Robert Morris's work had taken a decisive and shocking turn. In two concurrent exhibitions in New York, one at Leo Castelli Gallery and another at Sonnabend Gallery, Morris exhibited new large-scale, figurative reliefs and drawings produced over the past few years.<sup>1</sup> While premonitions had appeared in installations at the end of the 1970s, these new works scandalized for their spectacular embrace of conventions of art-making that Morris had, for the most part, eliminated from his oeuvre. Architectural in scale and garish in their depictions of eviscerated human remains and postapocalyptic landscapes, these works, and the paintings that followed, seemed to bring back all the myths of painting the Neo-Expressionists of the late 1970s and early 1980s were just then resurrecting as so many bankable traits of a "zombie" masculine virility: expressivity, figuration, and narrative, among them.<sup>2</sup>

Morris's turn away from the strategies of abstraction, deskilling, and indeterminacy that had guided his practice since the 1960s was so rapid, the reversals so all-encompassing, that little work has been done to square his activity in the '80s with the earlier phases of his career. What, after all, could unite the theorist of anti-form and entropy—maker of process-based, anti-object folds, tangles, and mounds of felt and thread waste—with the painter of these Baroque, Neo-

\* This text benefited from conversations with Benjamin Buchloh and Jennifer Roberts.

1. The exhibitions were, respectively, *Psychomachia: Drawings* (Leo Castelli Gallery) and *Hypnerotomachia: Reliefs and Firestorms: Drawings* (Sonnabend Gallery) (both January 8–29, 1983).

2. For more on the "zombies" of Neo-Expressionism, see Frazer Ward, "Undead Painting: Life After Life in the Eighties," in *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s*, ed. Helen Molesworth (Chicago: MoCA, 2011), pp. 50–64. For the key critique of Neo-Expressionism, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981), pp. 39–68.



Robert Morris. Untitled. 1982.

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Expressionist daubs? One response—and one that continues to plague the artist to this day—stands out for what it gets glaringly wrong, but also for what it, despite itself, gets right. This response consisted, in short, of framing Morris’s turn to painting as further evidence of his dubious status as an artistic “chameleon” or, even worse, a “kleptomaniac,” whose long career could be boiled down to a grab bag of eclectic borrowings and opportunistic appropriations of other artists’ work.<sup>3</sup> This last was the insult favored by Roberta Smith as early as 1991, when she reviewed a major exhibition of Morris’s 1980s work at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Questioning whether Morris had ever “achieved much art that is squarely and convincingly his own”—whether, that is, his art amounted to a series of “ideas and motifs lifted from the work of other artists”—Smith was clear in her critical position: Morris was a “fake” whose one gift was his decades-long strategy of plugging his work into each and every new fashion within the art world, from Conceptual art’s incorporation of language to post-Minimalism’s use of material processes to Land art’s scalar investigations.<sup>4</sup> For Smith, the new works proved it: Morris had arrived just in time for the latest trend, this time capitalizing on the largely market-driven return to painting that would define much art of the ’80s.

There is a kernel of truth here, and we will have to unpack it in what follows. But as it stands, Smith’s critique remains insufficiently theorized, unable to grapple with an oeuvre that continually rejected myths of originality and consistency as well as the presumption that an artistic corpus maintain disciplinary cohesion. Worse still, Smith’s critique and those like it refuse to attend to the specificities of the individual objects and series that make up Morris’s oeuvre, a necessity—and an immense challenge—when dealing with his work. Only in very rare cases—

3. For the former, see Kay Larson, “Robert Morris Goes Baroque,” *New York Magazine*, January 28, 1985, p. 78; for the latter, see Roberta Smith, “A Hypersensitive Nose for the Next New Thing,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 1991, p. 196.

4. Smith, “A Hypersensitive Nose,” p. 196.

Annette Michelson's crucial early essay on the artist being perhaps the first and most consequential—have historians attempted a critical appraisal of Morris's particular movements.<sup>5</sup> And as Michelson's text makes clear, any such appraisal can only ever be partial and provisional. One goal of the present essay will be to offer another, and one of its claims will be to argue that Morris's 1980s practice does, as Smith suggests, highlight crucial maneuvers within the artist's oeuvre at large, but not in the way that the eclecticism argument would have it. Though these late works do in fact borrow freely from other artists as well as from Morris's own previous work, they reveal less about what is borrowed or what is external to his art than what is internal to his way of thinking and working. What they reveal, in short, is a corpus guided by a Baroque philosophy of the *fold*, a sensibility premised, as Gilles Deleuze has theorized in his study of Baroque thought, on the generative, creative potential of working within the given—that is, of hinging, pleating, and folding preexisting ideas, materials, and techniques—rather than on the mythical energies of invention and originality.

Morris had long devoted himself, like others of his generation, to strategies of what he called “agency reduction”—the removal of his own subjectivity, his own “agency,” from the process of making—and he implemented these strategies within a range of materials and mediums during all phases of his oeuvre, from the lead and felt works of the 1960s to the *Blind Time* drawings from the 1970s forward.<sup>6</sup> These strategies, I think, might all be understood within Morris's particular approach to artistic labor, one founded on what I will here call a *principle of non-invention*. This was a strategy of not inventing things, a way of working with or reconfiguring what already exists into new configurations, of keeping them moving into the future. He said it himself in “Anti Form” from 1968. “In recent object-type art,” he wrote then, “the invention of new forms is not an issue.”<sup>7</sup> No invented objects, then, just “object-type” or “process-type” actions and proliferations, what Deleuze might have called “objectiles,” entities that are more in the vein of trajectories and unfoldings than of static works of art.<sup>8</sup> Moving into the future, these activities might ripple and fold, gathering new materials and new ideas along the way. The paintings, reliefs, and drawings of the 1980s bring this non-inventive principle to a head and, in so doing, help us articulate the various phases of Morris's approach, both its possibilities and its limitations.

5. See Annette Michelson, “Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression” (1969), in *Robert Morris*, ed. Julia Bryan-Wilson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), pp. 7–50.

6. Robert Morris, “Object Sculpture, 1960–1965: Robert Morris, Julia Robinson, Jeffrey Weiss: An Artist's Dialogue,” conversation held at the New York Public Library, April 16, 2014. Recording accessible at <https://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/object-sculpture-1960-1965-robert-morris-julia-robinson-jeffrey-weiss-artist-dialogue>.

7. Robert Morris, “Anti Form” (1968), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 43.

8. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1988), trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), p. 37.

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Morris's early *Firestorm* and *Psychomachia* drawings and imprints were shown together at Castelli Gallery in January 1983. The mural-sized works explicitly referenced military atrocities of the past—Dresden, Nagasaki, Hiroshima—and those of a possible Cold War future. Pressed up against the surface of the sheets, skeletal figures formed allover nets, caught in waves of force lines, expressive no doubt of the toxic winds of nuclear holocaust. Morris's *Hypnerotomachia* sculptures were shown concurrently at Sonnabend. He fabricated the ornate cast reliefs out of a plaster substance known by its brand name, Hydrocal, a material Morris would return to frequently in the 1980s. At least one of the works in this first batch was abstract, consisting of unpainted Futurist-inflected spirals of plaster produced by repeated thumb imprints. But in the main, these early Hydrocal works ran parallel to the figurative content of the *Firestorm* drawings, displaying swirling, piled, or otherwise intermingled fragments of eviscerated bodies, objects, and machine parts, some of which are handled by clutching fists.



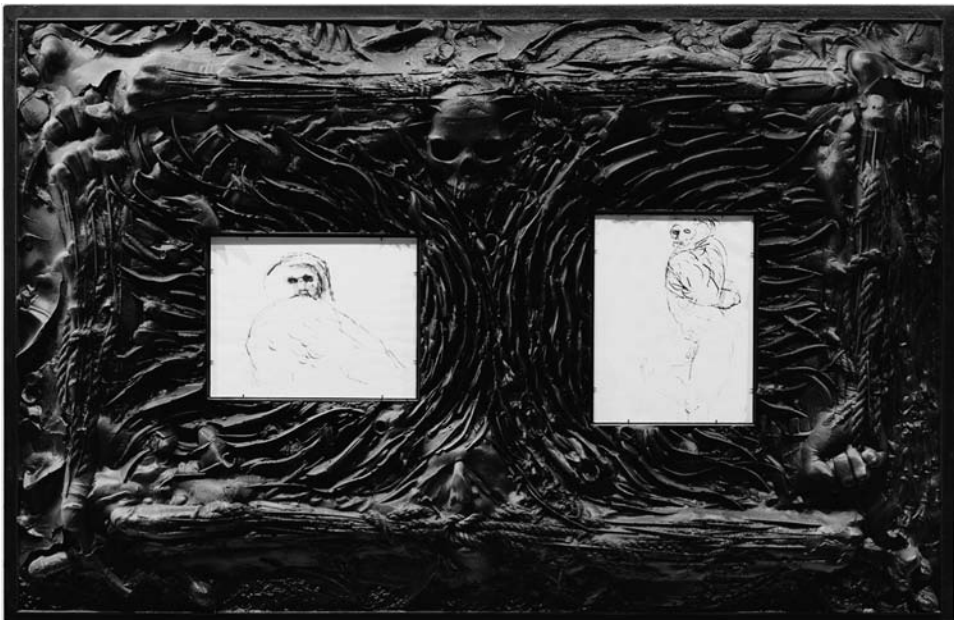
In subsequent series, Morris combined the formal tactics of the previous works, nesting discrete drawings and pastels within imposing, wall-sized Hydrocal frames, now painted with luminous purples, blacks, greens, and oranges. In the *Burning Planet* series, for instance, abstract drawings reference painterly traditions of the past. Recognizable are the atmospheric experiments of J.M.W. Turner, the caustic color schemes and careening brushstrokes of German Expressionists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, or the grand scale of painters associated with Neo-Expressionism, including Francesco Clemente, Julian Schnabel, and, even

Morris. Untitled. 1980. Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery.  
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more trenchantly, Anselm Kiefer. They are also, it should be noted, reminiscent of Morris's abstract paintings of the late 1950s, which generate effects of chiaroscuro from smeared blacks, grays, and reds. In other works executed at the same time as the *Burning Planet* pictures, such as *Fathers and Sons* (1955/1983), Morris was more explicit in his retrospective gaze, recontextualizing drawings he had made as an art student—and, in at least one case, as a child—within newly cast and painted Hydrocal frames. These are often, though not always, explicitly figurative, resembling nude studies or sketches made from historical works—like Michelangelo's unfinished *Rebellious Slave* (ca. 1515)—that deal with the transformation of raw matter into the figure, and they evince a desire to revisit earlier moments in art history alongside earlier stages in the artist's corpus. This urge to rework his previous projects was far-reaching, and would come to include not only Morris's student work and his early abstract paintings but his first mature series as well, such as the lead and felt



Morris. Untitled from *Burning Planet*. 1984.  
Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery. © 2019 The  
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Morris. *Fathers and Sons*. 1955/1983.  
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pieces of the 1960s. And it extended to his textual production of the period too, culminating in articles such as “Three Folds in the Fabric and Four Autobiographical Asides as Allegories (or Interruptions),” an enigmatic 1991 essay that “folds” together a structuralist analysis of twentieth-century art with personal soliloquies drawn from childhood experiences.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to this retrospective bent, Morris’s second round of painterly investigations contained another crucial theme: an increasing focus on the framing conditions of the work of art, either via acts of self-quotation or, more prominently, by moving the violent figurative motifs of the early Hydrocal pieces into the massive frames. As the series developed, Morris produced ever more Baroque frames in order to more spectacularly enshrine the atmospheric drawings in elaborate altar-like configurations. At the same time, Morris combined these oversized framing structures with increasingly erotic imagery frozen in a state of perpetual movement and flux: As if propelled by some nonhuman consciousness, phalli and fists move through the Hydrocal material, creating troughs of dark matter. Hands wield tools and weapons; ropes make knots out of plaster; and hardened soups of bodily fragments and machine parts create decorative patterns around centralized skulls peering down at the spectator. Within these ornate frames, Morris often inserted text pendants inscribed with direct references to war crimes and historical traumas of the past. Mixing reportage and the artist’s own musings, the texts tend to dwell on the transformation of violence into the movements of atmosphere and weather. Clinical description of annihilation turns quickly into a kind of experimental poetry of naming the weather of destruction: “Concussion waves (which leave no marks on the body). . . . Incineration, fragmentation devices, asphyxiation, flying glass, and melting roofs that created a rain of molten lead and copper on those below.”<sup>10</sup> Morris’s return to the painterly depiction of nature, it seems, came with a parallel fixation on the fluid, hybrid character of atmosphere, its status as a shifting substance composed of organic and man-made products, capable of calcifying into mutant mixtures generated as much by the physics of meteorology as by the patriarchal erotics of war.

Morris also clearly saw this dialectics of calcification and fluidity as a trait of the “decorative” and therefore as intimately connected to the function of the frame. The frame, after all, had historically been that zone to which the decorative was traditionally relegated—that site exterior to, but formative of, the work of art as an autonomous structure. Kimberly Paice and Annette Michelson have investigated the importance of the frame to the Hydrocal works, reflecting on Morris’s “framework” as a critique of the autonomy of the modernist work, which, they argue, following Jacques Derrida, depends on the frame to separate itself from the domain of physical

9. See Robert Morris, “Three Folds in the Fabric and Four Autobiographical Asides as Allegories (or Interruptions)” (1991), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, pp. 259–85.

10. This is the inscription on an untitled 1984 painting. It is transcribed in *Robert Morris: Works of the Eighties* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986), p. 54.

reality (Rodin is a touchstone for Michelson here).<sup>11</sup> This is a crucial part of the story, but Morris indicated another as well. In his 1981 text “American Quartet,” he pointed to a possible link between the decorative impulse in art history and the prospect of self-destruction.<sup>12</sup> In a Cold War present in which “the future no longer exists,” he wrote, the decorative was “apt,” being a “response on the edge of numbness.”<sup>13</sup> Decoration, that “ultimate activity of escape,” could stand for a crisis of the “imagination,” which had failed to protect humanity from the catastrophic fusion of nature and culture that was the bomb.<sup>14</sup> The decorative, then, was not expressive but anesthetized, generative of objects that had no use of human imagination any longer. If the artist was to intervene in this situation, a non-inventive, non-imaginative type of thinking and making had to be put forward.

Throughout the 1980s, Morris intensified both his assault on the frame and his decorative impulse, leading to ever more complex patterns of repeating, hardened forms arranged in symmetrical motifs within ornate framing structures. By 1986, his Hydrocal works had eliminated painting and drawing completely, consisting only of fragments of frame brought into the center of the work. The result was a situation in which distinctions between work and boundary, interior and exterior, blur into a collection of fragments, a maneuver Michelson and Paice link to an engagement with Baroque aesthetics.<sup>15</sup> This rings true. The Baroque, of course, represented one of those rare moments in the history of art when the logic of the decorative served as the engine, rather than the ornamental accoutrement, of aesthetic production. And it was a driving force behind some of post-Minimalism’s most enduring attacks on the framing condition of the work of art, as we know from the work of Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson, among others.

Morris’s paintings of this period are indeed Baroque, but the parergonal mechanics of the frame may not be the only way to get at his particular understanding of Baroque aesthetics. Rather, what I would like to unpack here is Morris’s attention to what we have called the particular movement of the fold. Like the frame, the activity of folding a surface creates an edge, a boundary, but it also produces a space, an interior, crafted from a single surface (which is, at the outset, all exterior). A fold or pleat in a surface, then, makes out of sameness—one single surface—a kind of multiplicity, turning a unitary surface into a spatially and temporally self-differentiating operation.<sup>16</sup> This activity, Deleuze tells us, is the

11. See Annette Michelson, “Frameworks,” and Kimberly Paice, “Hydrocals, 1982–84,” in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem* (New York: Guggenheim, 1994), pp. 50–61 and p. 282. See also Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (1978), trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago: 1987). Michelson’s key reference point is Rodin’s *Gates of Hell* (1880–1917).

12. Robert Morris, “American Quartet” (1981), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, p. 255.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

14. *Ibid.*

15. See Michelson, “Frameworks,” and Paice, “Hydrocals.”

16. For the key theorization of medium as a “self-differentiating” temporal practice, see Rosalind Krauss, *“A Voyage on the North Sea”: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

“operative function” of the Baroque sensibility, which, he writes, “endlessly produces folds.”<sup>17</sup> Importantly for him, the fold does not generate a new entity or create a separation; it takes an existing, static material—a piece of fabric, say, or even a preexisting idea—and by virtue of a repetition turns it into a movement of spatial and temporal multiplication. This operation was not limited to the Baroque as a bounded historical period but was, as Deleuze notes, carried forward by artists who shared a Baroque sensibility, including Paul Klee, Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, and the Minimalists as well. In one revealing footnote, Deleuze even calls for a “detailed review of explicitly Baroque themes” in “minimal art”: “We can especially refer to Robert Morris’s folds of felt,” he notes.<sup>18</sup>

While Deleuze sees the activity of the fold as a philosophical operation rather than as a physical or formal one (or one linked to particularly pliant materials like felt), Morris seemed to pursue both in parallel, allowing it to guide both the movement of ideas within his oeuvre as well as the making of particular works. Beginning in the 1960s, the fold or pleat became the formal operation that set Morris on the course of anti-form, resulting in years of felt works folded, draped, or stacked within and against the architectural frame of the gallery space. Those works, Morris explained at their outset in 1968, were experiments in “making itself”—that is, in the potential of materials to govern their own forming.<sup>19</sup> Such tactics represented one way to give agency over to the physical processes of matter and take it away from the authorial subject. Rather than the hardening of matter into singular objects produced by a coherent artistic subject, matter and force were what mattered in these endlessly folding, infinitely multiple works.

At the very beginning of his practice, then, Morris realized that the logic of the Baroque could be more than a formal operation that described the play of materials in space. It could also function as a model for undertaking transformations of form over time. The Baroque, Deleuze notes, “does not invent things.”<sup>20</sup> Rather, it “gathers all kinds of folds coming from the East, Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, Classical folds,” and merely “twists and turns them,” taking them to “infinity.”<sup>21</sup> What is important to a Baroque sensibility is not that it “invent” a new form but that it keep existing ones moving, multiplying, that it make form a matter of turning the same into a self-differing process of becoming. “Everything,” Deleuze notes, quoting Leibniz, “is ‘always the same thing,’” mere pleats in the fabric of those “monads” that make up physical reality.<sup>22</sup> Something

17. Deleuze, *The Fold*, p. 3.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 160 n 4.

19. Morris, “Anti Form,” p. 43.

20. Deleuze, *The Fold*, p. 3.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Gilles Deleuze, “The Fold,” *Yale French Studies* 80 (1991), p. 240. In his book, Deleuze adds of Leibniz’s work: “No philosophy has ever pushed to such an extreme the affirmation of a one and same world, and of an infinite difference or variety in this world” (Deleuze, *The Fold*, p. 58).



of this process was already present, for instance, in the founding works of Morris's career, such as *Card File* (1962), which he later evocatively described as both "self-enclosed" as well as "unending"; we might also say infinite—endlessly, even mad-deningly incorporating events of the world into its structure.<sup>23</sup> It was, in other words, a structure turned in on itself while also being infinitely connectable to existing discursive systems structuring experience, whether linguistic, administrative, or artistic.

The logic of the fold, I think, provides us with a poetics for thinking about Morris's formal activities both on a synchronic level—his aesthetic maneuvers of folding, tangling, and knotting, for instance—and on a diachronic one—his consistent practice of gathering up the existing materials and discourses of art-making and folding himself into them. What he shares with the Baroque, and what the paintings of the 1980s reveal in a particularly stark fashion, is, I think, this peculiar principle of non-invention or non-imagination, a Baroque sensibility of not inventing things that Smithson may have seized on when he referred to Morris early on as an entropic "artificer of the uncreative."<sup>24</sup> Both artists were avid readers of George Kubler, and like him they both rejected art-historical guideposts like "biography" and "style," categories that Kubler saw as freezing the evolution of forms within static concepts. Style "vanishes," Kubler wrote in *The Shape of Time* (1962), once aesthetic objects "are restored to the flow of time."<sup>25</sup> Morris's aesthetic of non-invention sought to restore the work of the artist to the temporal flow of forms in order to see in what unanticipated directions they might be taken, to see what futures they might find apart from the human (indeed, this might be one reason why we find the early Morris making an artistic self within things, as in *I-Box* or *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* [both 1961]). The fold, I think, offered Morris a way of working that could detach the movement of forms from the maker, like a fabric, Deleuze writes, able to "free its own folds from its usual subordination to the finite body it covers."<sup>26</sup>

In certain ways, Morris's non-inventive creativity paralleled the "minor history" that Branden Joseph has traced in the anti-authorial activities of Tony Conrad (a history that, at times, included Morris). "Minor artistic activities," Joseph writes, are marked by a subversive tenor that is "too prolix, too heterogeneous, too variable, too undeveloped for major histories to account for."<sup>27</sup> Culminating in the 1980s work, the Baroque folds of Morris's non-inventive tactics stand apart, however. New models are needed, I think, to account for a corpus in which the decora-

23. See "Object Sculpture, 1960–1965: Robert Morris, Julia Robinson, Jeffrey Weiss."

24. Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), p. 19.

25. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (Hew Haven: Yale, 1962), p. 130.

26. Deleuze, *The Fold*, p. 121.

27. Branden W. Joseph, "What Is a Minor History," in *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage* (Cambridge, MA: Zone, 2008), p. 52.

tive and the traumatic, the deathly and the generative, all succumb to the appropriative, and infinitely recursive, logic of the fold.

To repeat, this is not to say that I see Morris, as Smith does, as a cunning kleptomaniac. Such a critique still holds on to the mythical demand that an artist express a unique “style.” Instead, I see a disciplined approach built from the basic operation of folding and refolding given discourses and aesthetic forms. The goal, again, was not to “invent things” but to keep existing ones moving in different directions, to keep them “twisting and turning,” like the labyrinths Morris designed to entangle the spectator in the 1970s.<sup>28</sup> Making the artist non-inventive or “uncreative,” Morris realized, might reveal a form of invention determined by objects and acts themselves, one that Kubler attempted to outline as well: “No two things or acts can be accepted as identical. Every act is an invention.”<sup>29</sup> By the early 1980s, Morris understood, only this type of non-inventive invention could face up to an age in which “imagination” had failed.

For Morris, then, the corpus itself—the idea that an artist’s oeuvre must express a coherent artistic self—was also to be a set of folds, attempts to keep given ideas, materials, and strategies moving into the future, even after the future had been foreclosed. The decorative tactics of the Hydrocal works, therefore, should not be seen as cynically defeatist or ironical; decoration’s assault on “imagination” tapped into a dynamic that had been at play in Morris’s work from the beginning. For him, decoration could provide yet one more appropriative, anti-authorial technique for giving movement to the forms and materials themselves—one that could contend with the particular challenges of the 1980s.

The paintings of the 1980s evince an intensification of Morris’s long-held devotion to the fold, and his adoption of Neo-Expressionist formal maneuvers could be understood as further evidence of its movement. But their presence also reflects a new development. By the early ’80s, Morris had clearly begun to cast a retrospective gaze on the many folds of his own corpus, a peculiar backward-facing perspective he made clear in works like *Fathers and Sons*. This gaze was shared by the Hydrocal works as a whole, which combined, shockingly, Neo-Expressionist tactics with those anti-expressive maneuvers that Morris had cultivated in his earlier series of the 1960s. One cannot help but recognize, for example, the fossilized remains of those very anti-form tangles and scatters in the hardened, entropic mixtures of the Hydrocal frames or the hybrid ecologies of his pastels. Nor can one deny the resurfacing of body and object casting that Morris first developed in his earliest series of lead sculptures. Along with his series of *Blind Time* (1973–2015) drawings, these two strains of his oeuvre were the folds that “twisted and turned” into the later work, and this essay will trace each in turn.

There is also the matter of Morris’s personal history, those “autobiographical asides” that came into greater focus in his aesthetic production and written reflec-

28. Deleuze, *The Fold*, p. 3.

29. Kubler, p. 67.

tions of the '80s and especially in the early '90s, just following the completion of his Hydrocal series. Increasingly, the work of these years began to fold together the recollection of memories with the re-collection of earlier works in his corpus. On multiple occasions before his death, Morris indicated that "childhood memories" could be linked to nearly all of his output, and already by the early '90s, when Morris collected many of his previous texts in *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1993), he could speak of his objects as bearing particular life spans that had run their course.<sup>30</sup> "What is alive in any given mode of art making is necessarily brief," he wrote in the introduction to the volume. "The context that presided at its birth does not endure any more than do we remain the same. But sufficiently numerous a posteriori texts . . . will always serve to parade the corpse along the halls of culture."<sup>31</sup> Objects from his protean aesthetic corpus, in other words, were coming to be seen as *familial* in character, as visceral beings in themselves, productive of his own physical corpus, but now lost. If the artist was only a set of folds prone to reanimation, they were, by the 1980s, beginning to take on an uncanny character, both generative and deathly.

By 1987, when Morris installed his series of paintings known informally as the Holocaust works at Documenta 8, he had turned to the photographic image to highlight this haunting quality.<sup>32</sup> To make these works, Morris appropriated the gruesome, instantly recognizable photographs of corpses taken by Allied soldiers during the liberation of Bergen-Belsen and other concentration camps at the end of World War II. What resulted were a number of grotesque screen-printed paintings, seemingly ironic in their hypertrophic Pop-kitsch procedures. These culminating works brought figuration to the center of the Baroque frames, washing rows of emaciated bodies in synthetic, incandescent color, cropping them suggestively, and in certain cases lining them with strips of felt, the key fabric folding together Morris's long career.

These are difficult, perhaps cynical, works that seek to provoke, and we will have to confront their content later on. But for now, we should note that their commingling of photograph, felt, and casting signals an allegorical dimension to Morris's 1980s paintings, works that seek in part to display the process of reanimating dead, appropriated photographic fragments by including, as Craig Owens wrote of the allegorical, their "own commentary"<sup>33</sup> (and indeed, Morris's "American Quartet" even includes a section of commentary as its conclusion). O. K. Werckmeister has indicated an allegorical reading of the *Burning Planet* works as well, noting how Morris "upheld the radical reflection on artistic practice" that marked his work from the 1960s forward, now "representing it in the pictures

30. See "Object Sculpture, 1960–1965: Robert Morris, Julia Robinson, Jeffrey Weiss."

31. Robert Morris, "Introduction," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, p. x.

32. For more on this display, see O. K. Werckmeister, "Lucas, Morris," in *Citadel Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1991), pp. 164–71.

33. Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (Spring 1980), p. 69.

themselves.”<sup>34</sup> We might add a third mode of allegory to the mix as well, the one theorized by Theodor W. Adorno in his analysis of “late style”—that period of production in which an established artist measures her own mortality against the life span of her previous work, that “corpse,” Morris wrote, that insists on traipsing around the “halls of culture.”<sup>35</sup> The late work, Adorno writes, does not, however, “express” mortality or the “personality” of the artist. As mere arrangements of matter, art objects don’t “express,” nor do they live or die like “created beings,” he reminds us. Rather, late style evinces the way in which subjectivity “takes leave of the works themselves,” leaving only “expressionless” fragments separated from the “master.”<sup>36</sup> We might, by these lights, see Morris’s late style as a series of demonstrations of the impossibility—the false character—of resolving the folds of an artist’s corpus into an expressive, unified whole. In doing so, they might also allegorize the death of expressivity too, and by extension the “zombie” masculinity of Neo-Expressionist subjectivity. In its place, Morris seems to proffer an alternative form of “zombie” subjectivity, one that rejected the notion that a work of art must be tied to a singular author.

But Morris’s works add another dimension to the allegorical one, and it is this latter aspect that marks the strangeness of his “late style.” If the 1980s work marked the beginning of an extended late style, it also revealed how a kind of lateness presided even at the “birth” of Morris’s long, variegated career. His principle of non-invention had, as we will soon see, queried what form of life the art object—having taken leave of the subjectivity of the artist—might create on its own terms. What was its mode of procreation, generation, and creativeness? For certain critics, this impulse read as thievery, indicative of a subjectivity that failed to express itself in objects. But for Morris, it allowed for a philosophical investigation into the nonlife of the art object—a nonlife that, at least for him, could harbor its own type of creative intelligence. Sometimes he figured this life as vitalist, sometimes as technological, and at other times it was more hybrid, an assemblage in which the life of the artist—his memories, affects, and desires—were folded together with the alien life of his objects. It was this latter path, I think, that proved the most fruitful, leading to aesthetic activities in which life and nonlife could interface, erotically.

At the beginning of the ’80s, Roland Barthes would speak of the photograph similarly, as an “umbilical cord” connecting the body with the thingliness of the image (this might also serve as a description of Morris’s use of concentration-camp photographs).<sup>37</sup> He seemed to view the photograph in a way parallel to how

34. O. K. Werckmeister, “Morris, Lucas,” in *Citadel Culture*, p. 152.

35. Morris, “Introduction,” in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, p. x.

36. Theodor W. Adorno, “Late Style in Beethoven” (1937), in *Essays on Music* (University of California Press, 2002), p. 566.

37. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 81.

Morris saw his own work, as a kind of self-enclosed and infinite thing, a singularity isolated from the infinity of a spatial and temporal continuum. Adamantly individual, resisting “any reductive system,” the photograph for Barthes called out for a “new science for each object”—a logic tailored to fit each absolutely singular image.<sup>38</sup> No system, “no corpus” here, “only some bodies.”<sup>39</sup>

*Self-Enclosed, Unending*

*If one goes beyond appearances, lead is actually the metal of death: because its weight is a desire to fall, and to fall is a property of corpses, because its very color is dulled-dead, because it is the metal of the planet Truisto, which is the slowest of the planets, that is, the planet of the dead.*

—Primo Levi

From the beginning, Morris’s work pursued a dual path. There was the path of singularity and enclosure, an urge to seal the work of art in a science completely and uniquely its own—to create, as Smithson wrote, “monumental artifices of ‘idea.’”<sup>40</sup> And then there was the appropriative path, the desire to construct infinitely connective objects able to hook up to as many sources, artistic techniques, and ideas as possible, including those gathered from the likes of Jackson Pollock, Jasper Johns, Joseph Cornell, Joseph Beuys, George Brecht, and Marcel Duchamp, to name a few.<sup>41</sup> Morris’s appropriative impulse contained yet another aspect: Infinitely connective objects could also be infinitely expansive, implementing tautologies that seemed to grow ever larger and more inclusive. Starting with his first mature series, which consisted of roughly one hundred lead, wood, and Sculptmetal constructions made between 1960 and 1965, Morris found ways to knot these paths together within single objects, producing unsettling contradictions.

Take *Card File*, one of the earliest of these “process-type objects” or “object sculptures,” as Jeffrey Weiss has termed them.<sup>42</sup> Using a card-catalog file as a kind of readymade system, the work consists of forty-eight alphabetically ordered index

38. Ibid., p. 8.

39. Ibid.

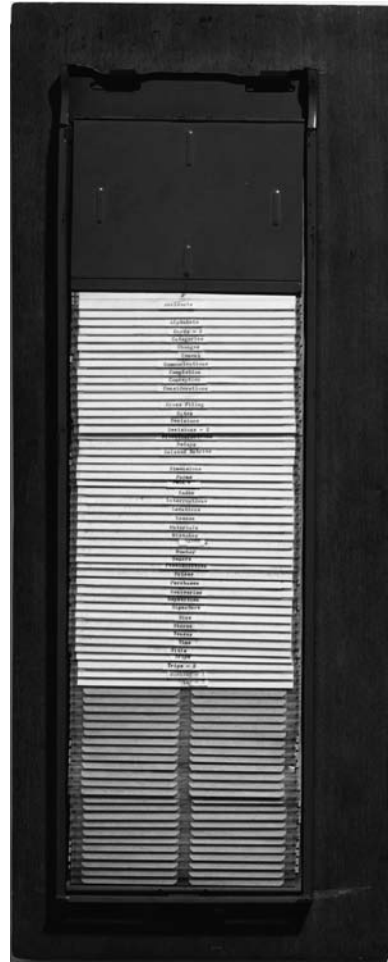
40. Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” p. 14.

41. My thanks to Hal Foster for helping me think through this “appropriative” bent.

42. For more on these terms, the first of which is Morris’s, the second of which is Weiss’s, see Jeffrey Weiss, “Things Moving and Things Stopped,” in *Robert Morris: Object Sculpture 1960–1965* (New Haven: Yale, 2013), pp. 13–76.

cards, each inscribed with a heading related to the construction of the work itself. These include “Accidents,” “Conception,” “Delays,” “Dimensions,” and “Title.” On the “Dissatisfactions” card, for example, a single entry dated “7/17/62, 5:30pm” lists a perceived weakness in the work, a worry “That everything relevant will not be recorded.” Morris similarly lists “The inclusion of the category ‘Completion,’” logged, perhaps a bit anxiously, at 4:30 a.m. on 12/17/62, as the concluding entry of the “Mistakes” card.<sup>43</sup>

*Card File* has often been understood as a precedent of Conceptual art’s incorporation of linguistic tautologies as structuring mechanisms. A broader Duchampian attempt to negate the primacy of the “visual” seems operative here too, what W. J. T. Mitchell has described as Morris’s desire to produce a series of “cases” or “philosophical objects” that refuse the “retinal” in favor of the “mental” aspect of artistic reception.<sup>44</sup> These are “philosophical,” Mitchell implies, in their commitment to setting up absurdist experiments that seem to invent scientific methods specific to their own existence, like Duchamp’s foundational *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913–14). And yet, as the above entries in *Card File* indicate and as Eve Meltzer has detailed, Morris’s work offers an anxious, even paranoid tautology, through its acknowledgment that “everything relevant” would of course never be “recorded.”<sup>45</sup> *Card File* could thus never reach “completion.” Instead, as Morris wrote to John Cage in early 1963, the work welcomed the recording of further mistakes or suggestions



Morris. *Card File*. 1962.  
Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery.  
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Morris/ARS, New York.

43. For a full transcription of the contents of *Card File*, see Weiss, *Object Sculpture*, pp. 106–09.

44. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Wall Labels: Word, Image, and Object in the Work of Robert Morris,” in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, p. 62.

45. For more on anxiety in relation to Morris’s work, see Eve Meltzer, “Turning Around, Turning Away,” in *Systems We Have Loved* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 71–116.

that would have to be painstakingly entered on the blank cards provided at the bottom of the work.<sup>46</sup>

Later on, Morris would refer to this work as “self-enclosed” but also, paradoxically, as “unending,” as if to indicate the intertwining of autonomy and connectivity—a kind of Baroque intensification of interiority that reverses into pure exteriority and temporal becoming. If *Card File* were still in his possession, Morris indicated recently, he would “still be adding to it.”<sup>47</sup> The problem here seemed to be “not how to finish a fold,” as Deleuze wrote of the Baroque, “but how to continue it, make it go through the roof, take it to infinity.”<sup>48</sup> How, in other words, to create an assembly that might connect to further inputs, bodies, and actions, including all those things that would necessarily be left out of the work? Smithson again seemed to recognize this activity of the fold at an early stage, quoting Sydney Freedberg on Parmigianino to refer to Morris’s work as “an assembly of surfaces.”<sup>49</sup>

This infinite unfolding of interior as exterior surface played an even greater role in the earlier *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), another process-based, task-oriented tautology that is also, as Branden Joseph has claimed, “decidedly hybrid,” one made up of a diverse set of media, activities, bodies, and materials.<sup>50</sup> The conceit was simple: Construct a box from a piece of walnut, recording the three-and-a-half-hour process on audiotape. Placed within the finished box, the audio track was then looped, thereby producing an object that ceaselessly exteriorizes the “narrative” of its own becoming.<sup>51</sup> Crucially, however, this narrative is permanently hidden within an enclosed interior. In doing so, *Box with Sound* points to a state of infinite becoming, restaging its creation story within the cognitive faculties of each spectator who encounters it.

There is an uncanny experimental quality to this operation too, perceptively theorized by Rosalind Krauss. In works like *Box with Sound*, Krauss notes, Morris seemed to be probing the agency of inanimate matter. “What is it like,” Krauss imagines Morris asking, “to be a box?”<sup>52</sup> An absurd question to be sure, but it’s one that gets to the heart of Morris’s intimate, even familial, relation to his objects. On the one hand, this intimacy was a result of what Weiss has referred to

46. Quoted in Weiss, *Object Sculpture*, p. 104.

47. Morris, “Object Sculpture, 1960–1965: Robert Morris, Julia Robinson, Jeffrey Weiss.”

48. Deleuze, “The Fold,” p. 242.

49. Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” p. 20.

50. Joseph, “The Tower and the Line,” in *Beyond the Dream Syndicate*, p. 119. Joseph’s chapter is crucial to understanding the place of Morris’s Minimalist objects within a larger framework of multi-disciplinary experimentation.

51. For more on Morris’s interest in “narrative,” see “Object Sculpture, 1960–1965: Robert Morris, Julia Robinson, Jeffrey Weiss.”

52. Rosalind Krauss, “The Mind/Body Problem: Robert Morris in Series,” in *The Mind/Body Problem*, p. 3.

as Morris's attempts to "exteriorize" intimate bodily processes—whether physical or cognitive—within forms of making.<sup>53</sup> But Morris also seemed intent, at this time, on investigating what kind of personhood, what kind of subjectivity, might pertain to the *thing*. Here, after all, is an interiority with a voice, one that speaks its biography to a listener and is able, like a body, to hook itself up to other prostheses, such as the recording device, the gallery interior, or the human ear and mind. Not quite body, such assemblages might best be understood as machines or apparatuses designed to assemble disparate activities, technologies, and bodies. They also possess a kind of viral character as well, recreating themselves within the interiority of the spectator's mental architecture. Self-enclosed, yes, but also adamantly connective.

As *Sculptmetal-and-wood* constructions like *Enlarged and Reduced Inches* (1963) make clear, Morris began to see such machines as potentially image-generating too, even camera-like. Consisting of a box with two openings on either side, the work provides two views onto a six-inch ruler positioned at its core. These openings, however, are fitted with optical materials functioning as "windows with lenses, one a magnifying one and one a reducing," that distort the measuring



Morris. *Enlarged and Reduced Inches*. 1963.

Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery.

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stick within. Following Duchamp's *3 Standard Stoppages*, the work no doubt seeks to institute new "standards of measure" by manipulating the units of the ruler, but now we are given an image-generating apparatus that, by virtue of its being porous to the world, might inflect and disturb the scales of physical reality itself. Once joined to the body of the spectator as a visual prosthesis, then, the work might actively re-measure its environment, like a madcap film camera.

With *I-Box* (1962), Morris brought the body to the center of these efforts. A small plywood box coated with *Sculptmetal* and painted matte gray and pink, the work includes a hinged, "I"-shaped cabinet that can be opened (by a miniature knob) to reveal a photograph of a naked Morris grinning at the viewer. The work clearly partakes of the indexical operation of "shifter" pronouns like "I" and "you" identified early on by Roman Jakobson and taken up subsequently by Krauss to

53. See Weiss, "Things Moving and Things Stopped," pp. 59–67.



theorize the photographic qualities of the index.<sup>54</sup> In Krauss's formulation, the photographic index, like the shifter, merely points or directs our attention, without naming the object itself. What results is a multiplication of possible "I's," shifting depending on the subject and object of the pointing.

Faced with *I-Box*, *Box with Sound*, and *Enlarged and Reduced Inches*, we might extend this theorization further, for clearly Morris had begun to see certain "object sculptures" as technologies for generating new recordings—whether image or sound-based. These did not simply demonstrate the activity of the shifter but actively produced new image assemblies, like DIY camera technologies. "At first," Barthes reminds us in *Camera Lucida*, "photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision."<sup>55</sup> They might, he continues, still maintain an audible connection to "the living sound of wood."<sup>56</sup> If an image contains the vital energies and sounds of wood, however, it will have to be a hybridized energy, one that, as *I-Box* and *Box with Sound* demonstrate, must immediately hook itself up to other machines, bodies, and movements.

Morris's focus on lead as a material around this time can be explained at least in part by precisely this kind of hybrid condition. Lead could satisfy his search for a material positioned somewhere between machined, technological substance, on the one hand, and malleable, bodily matter, on the other. Indeed, Morris was "drawn to" lead, he remarked later, "because of its inert quality, its ability to lock out things, and its sensuous skin-like quality."<sup>57</sup> Like skin, lead can be folded, wrinkled, pleated; and as a weak conductor (or when used in batteries), it can also hold a kind of energy, but its vitality is "inert," corpse-like. The epidermis of lead, Morris realized, can assume the surface of some kind of machine-body that might also "lock out" the exterior world, as the early (and perhaps first) lead piece *Litanies* (1963) articulates in classic Duchampian negation.<sup>58</sup> A lockbox in the guise of a lead relief, the work consists of a brass keyhole positioned above a slit. At the bottom of this thin opening hangs a key ring holding twenty-seven uncut keys, each stamped with a word from Duchamp's "Litanies of the Chariot." Permanently held together by some sort of wax or tape substance, the ring cannot release its keys without being destroyed, while the original key, we are told, has been lost. A self-enclosed device designed to permanently "lock out" the world nevertheless presents an uncanny connective and erotic quality, called up by the skin-like creases that conform to the shape of the ring and its keys.

Like the narrative of "cinematic blossoming" diagrammed in Duchamp's grand "bachelor machine," *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large*

54. See Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part I" and "Notes on the Index: Part II," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 196–220.

55. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 15.

56. *Ibid.*

57. Quoted in Weiss, *Object Sculpture*, p. 148.

58. Though there is some doubt, Weiss seems to indicate that this was, in fact, the first lead piece. See Weiss, *Object Sculpture*, p. 148. For more on the life story of this object after its purchase by Philip Johnson, see Weiss, *Object Sculpture*, pp. 148–151.

*Glass*) (1915–23), such devices queried whether a form of sensuality and reproduction might pertain to the nonhuman movements of the machine.<sup>59</sup> Morris pursued this Duchampian path in several objects of this period, including *Untitled (Cock/Cunt)* (1963), a machine as resistant to verbal description as it is simple in its construction. Consisting of two readymade rulers hinged together and mounted in the center of a lead-gray wooden panel, the work calls out for a spectator to manipulate the two rulers, turning them into a kind of infrathin cabinet that opens and closes. Each ruler is painted gray on one side, while the unpainted side retains the notches and numbers of the standard measuring stick. When folded together, this data is made invisible, erotically sandwiched together under a skin of gray monochrome. At top, the word CUNT is stenciled onto the gray ground, while just below, in the center, COCK is stenciled to the painted side of one of the rulers. Their positioning is such that when the two rulers are unfolded to reveal their unpainted interiors, COCK and CUNT physically meet under the cover of one of the unfolded measuring sticks.

A device for producing nonhuman sensuality, *Untitled (Cock/Cunt)* and the objects like it evince an attempt to externalize desire in participatory objects that can redistribute or store erotic energy within matter and the standard units of measure that discipline it. More “desiring-machines” than functional prostheses, Morris’s works institute a “system of interruptions and breaks” that aim at measuring or regulating the flow of erotic desire by stopping and starting it—a “break-flow,” as Deleuze and Felix Guattari might have called it.<sup>60</sup> What results is often both generative and negative, an impulse that stems, once again, from the operation of the fold. Here, folding and unfolding can be understood as both an act of enclosure and generation, even reproduction. The same, over and over again. When seen alongside *I-Box*, *Untitled (Cock/Cunt)* goes further to suggest that an erotic form of becoming might result from folding together seemingly disparate materials, bodies, and systems—language, flesh, surface, and units of measure among them. No longer at the center of this process, the human subject and its modes of procreation would now have to be folded into some kind of all-encompassing, nonliving creativeness, productive of hybrid assemblies that fuse body, object, and machine. And as *I-Box* also foregrounds, the image, too, would have to be folded together with these various other zones of experience, a hybridization that, by the end of his lead works, Morris would see increasingly in terms of the self-enclosed field, particularly those produced by electromagnetism.

The earliest lead works incorporated knots and tangles of rope, suspended balls, or hanging elements as figures of stored, potential energy. But by 1964, no doubt in dialogue with Beuys’s sculptural use of magnetic force, these were joined

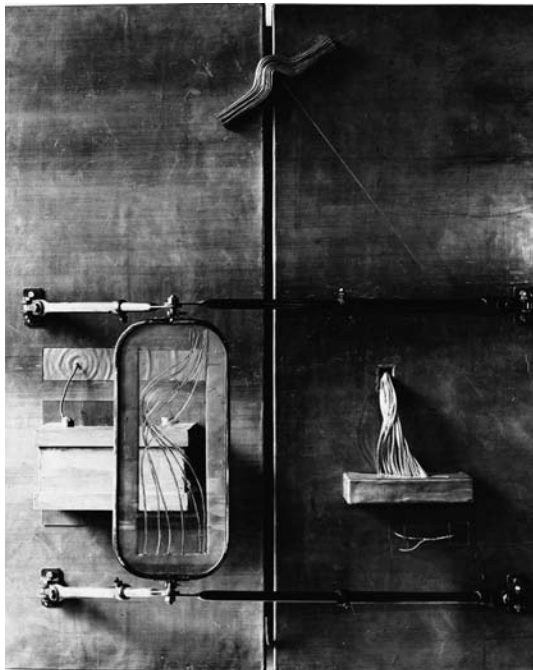
59. See Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even: A Typographic Version by Richard Hamilton of Marcel Duchamp’s Green Box* (1934), trans. George Heard Hamilton (London: Wittenborn, 1960), n.p.

60. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Penguin, 2009 [1972]), p. 36.

by readymade objects that might be seen as holding electromagnetic charge: batteries, wires, and iconographies of magnetic fields and forces (sometimes referred to as “ripples” in the titles). In several reliefs, these various elements were joined together, as in *Untitled (Batteries with Ripples)* or *Untitled (Hanging Battery)* (both 1964). For the latter, Morris wired an impression of a battery set in the surface to a suspended one hanging from the panel, as if to create an absurd power generator. In a more complicated horizontal sculpture called *Battery* (1964) and in an untitled relief from the same year, Morris began to search for irrational energies in the ruler—that favored readymade object he no doubt picked up from Johns’s earlier gray paintings. For the first work, he dangled a six-inch ruler from two wires, both of which he hooked up to one panel of the relief. And for the second, Morris connected a series of wires from a suspended ruler through a lead-covered wood mount and into a battery.

Such machines can be considered photographic in a theoretical sense: A camera, Morris seems to be implying, may be nothing more than a ruler charged with electrical current, a machine for measuring and doubling reality according to its own technical standard. Rather than functional image-generating machines, however, these works are more in the vein of diagrams, which take as their subject the idea of the photographic. In a different untitled work from 1964, for instance, Morris produced yet another “bachelor machine,” a two-paneled lead relief hinged by a truck mirror that Morris wired up to a battery. Here, an optical device—the mirror—has been electronically grafted to the surface, now understood as an energy-storing site. Looking, reflecting, and other image-generating gestures, it seems, had become potential sources of energy for Morris’s machines. Such gestures would, however, quickly give way to bodily ones, as in a related work that links an impression of female genitalia with a hanging battery. Later works incorporated further cast body parts, such as dragged hands and fingers, clear harbingers of the *Hydrocal* works to come.

The erotic potential of storing and releasing energy within industrial materials was also key to Morris’s so-called



*Morris. Untitled. 1964.*

*Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery.*

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anti-form works, which began in earnest around 1967 and introduced a key material that would, alongside the casting processes of the leads, resurface in his paintings of the 1980s. As with the lead works, these new process-based setups of packing felt were perfectly timed to participate in and appropriate current discursive shifts within art and theory, namely, the exploration of entropic procedures of unmaking in the work of Claes Oldenburg, Richard Serra, Eva Hesse, Robert Smithson, and others. In his foundational 1968 manifesto-like text “Anti Form,” Morris, if we remember, understood this appropriative bent as internal to the formless as an idea. In works that mobilize entropic processes, he wrote, “the invention of new forms is not an issue.”<sup>61</sup> A principle of non-invention, then, was strategic rather than opportunistic, an essential maneuver within Anti Form’s attack on the formal coherence of the art object.

Morris’s essay goes on to codify a language of sculpture developed by a number of artists in this post-Minimalist, post-Pop moment, including Oldenburg, Serra, and Morris himself. Building on a novel reading of Pollock’s drip paintings, he identifies a shared “focus on matter and gravity as means” as well as a widespread turn to soft, industrially fabricated materials.<sup>62</sup> By relegating the process of decision-making to chance procedures of “random piling, loose stacking, hanging,” anti-form artists, Morris writes, produce horizontally arranged, sculptural counter-objects that “give passing form . . . to the material,” rather than a rigid, coherent shape: “object-type” rather than objects as such.<sup>63</sup> “Chance,” Morris elaborates, “is accepted and indeterminacy is implied, since replacing will result in another configuration.”<sup>64</sup> The only thing capable of stopping the movement of the formless, Morris’s text implies, is exterior context: the hardened institutional frame supporting the work.

To enact his own anti-form procedures, Morris employed gray, black, and brown packing felt, an industrially produced material, which he viewed, in parallel with lead, as skin-like. For certain works, including *Untitled (Stacked and Folded)* (1967), Morris simply laid stacks of felt directly on the ground and made a fold. While such works exhibit the process of making, they can also produce startling, even illusionistic, visual effects, resembling contour maps or line drawings. In the case of *Stacked and Folded*, such visual effects carry architectural implications too, as layered folds mirror and multiply the corners of the cubic space of the gallery. To prepare other felt works, Morris cut the material into strips of various sizes and patterns; he then hung the shredded fabric from pins in the gallery wall, allowing gravity to determine the form of the felt as it slumped from wall to floor. This engagement with the architectural container of the gallery mirrored the standard function of Morris’s chosen material, a packing layer often used for securing and

61. Morris, “Anti Form,” p. 43.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*



Morris. *Untitled (Stacked and Folded)*. 1967. Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery. © 2019 The Estate of Robert Morris/ARS, New York.

protecting sensitive surfaces and objects during transport. Felt, Morris no doubt understood, is a peripheral substance, pertaining less to the object than to its frame and the forms of labor required of it.<sup>65</sup>

Depending on the way the felt had been cut, the entropic potential of its interactions with the meeting of wall and floor varied greatly. Some works, like *Untitled (Tangle)* (1968), are exactly that: “tangles” of ropy slivers of felt that dangle from a single pin and pile on the floor. Works like *Tangle* exemplify the anti-object goals Morris outlines in “Anti Form.” A major aim of such sculpture, Morris writes, was to mobilize techniques of unmaking that would have nothing to do with “pre-conceived enduring forms,” enacting a “refusal to continue estheticizing form by dealing with it as a prescribed end.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, “geometric form,” even shape itself, had to be dismantled by the nonhuman agency of gravity; material alone should be responsible for determining its own form.<sup>67</sup> This was the path that led to scatter pieces like *Untitled (Threadwaste)* (1968), works that rejected any sort of forming altogether, opting instead for the random dispersal of matter directly on the floor.

Once again, the object-status of the work of art was at stake. To combat a consumer society already overwhelming subjects with ever more objects, images, and

65. For more on Morris’s relationship to the politics of labor, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Robert Morris’s Art Strike,” *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2009), pp. 83–126.

66. Morris, “Anti Form,” p. 43.

67. *Ibid.*

commodities, Morris understood that strategies were needed to refuse the artist's prescribed role as a contributor to the world of *things*. This, he would write later on, was a determining blind spot of his earlier Minimalist objects (such as those exhibited in his famous Green Gallery show in 1964), whose gestalts too closely approached the status of the object. One had to, instead, make folds in existing things. Morris's felts should be viewed as one path forward, but by no means was it straightforward. While the felt works—in their operations of infinite folding and refolding—presuppose an infinity of possible forms, many seem designed to crystallize into single, symmetrical, or even anthropomorphic shapes. This was already the case when Morris first showed his felts at Castelli Gallery in 1968, exhibiting entropic works like *Tangle* alongside decidedly sensuous, potentially representational pieces like *Untitled (Six Legs)* (1969) and *Untitled (Catenary)* (1968). This tendency only became more pronounced in the ensuing years with works like *Untitled (Shoulder)* (1973) and, beginning in 1983, the *House of the Vetti* series. For the former, Morris draped three rectangular pieces of felt over one another, hanging them from two pins such that all three would fold to form a diagonal and then, together, a right angle at the corner of wall and floor. What results is an abstract but suggestive pattern: A square-shaped area remains, painting-like, at the center, while the draped fabric surrounding it creates the illusion of epidermal folds surrounding a kind of opening. Because the three sheets of felt are different shades—dark brown, reddish brown, and grayish brown—the work also institutes a series of sensuous color gradations, especially at the points



Morris. *Untitled (Shoulder)*. 1973.  
Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery.  
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*Morris. House of the Vetti II. 1983.  
Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery. © 2019  
The Estate of Robert Morris/ARS, New York.*

where the felt is folded or creased at the floor. Such works attest to the importance of color in Morris's felts. In his subsequent works especially, he carefully chose the shades of his felt rather than rely only on factory standards. And later on, he started to produce his own felt material, allowing for further experimentation with dyeing.<sup>68</sup>

For *House of the Vetti*, a series of erotic felts that coincided with the first Hydrocal reliefs, Morris transformed the suggestion of sensuous imagery into outright provocation. Now using metal grommets machined into the felt material, Morris allowed himself more control over the hanging process, constructing elaborate and decidedly symmetrical compositions. Felt folds feigned genital ones, as eight-foot-tall "central core" motifs unfurled to simulate a pink, red, and brown vaginal opening at the joining of wall and floor. In one sense, the *House of the Vetti* series evinces Morris's attempt to address a blind spot in the anti-form paradigm, what the artist would later term, using a phallic metaphor, the "cyclopean evil eye"

68. See Robert Morris, "Oral History Interview with Robert Morris, 2018 April 19–20," conducted by Svetlana Kitto, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

of the photograph.<sup>69</sup> If the early felts sought to unravel the object, they had not, Morris realized, sufficiently addressed the fetishizing gaze of the camera, that machine for freezing the formless flux of matter into a “static, consumable image.”<sup>70</sup> It was this power of the photograph to transform the flux of life into what Siegfried Kracauer famously termed the “ornament” that *Threadwaste’s* “lateral spread” sought to dismantle.<sup>71</sup> The goal there was to create what Morris called a “Baroque” effect—a shifting “continuity of details,” rather than a static “profile or plan view” ready to be converted into a still image.<sup>72</sup> And yet he understood as early as the late 1970s that even the most “Baroque” works—those that emphasized “multiple views” and renounced the “gestalt”—would, via the photograph, end up as frozen objects, seductive ornaments once more (the vertical mirrors stuck into *Threadwaste’s* piles might be said to dramatize this dialectic between formless scatter and the static photographic rectangle).<sup>73</sup>

By 1978, Morris was explicit about this “irony”: Because much anti-object work was adamantly “temporary,” built only to be “dismantled” once again, “its future existence in the culture will be strictly photographic.”<sup>74</sup> And in 1994, looking back on his felts from the vantage of his major retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, Morris reminisced provocatively on their fate. Referring to the anti-form works of 1967–69 as “strategies for forgetting,” Morris emphasized their status as “an indeterminate set of formal ‘moments’ without any final configuration.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, “they worked to forget their form.”<sup>76</sup> The anti-form works, then, could be described as *forgetting-forms*, objects that might forget their identity as such. Still, Morris realized, even this self-forgetting status was bound to be forgotten, “for when others attempt to reinstall one of these works they invariably construct it from a photograph, as if the work had only that one possible shape.”<sup>77</sup> The *House of the Vetti* series might be seen as a hypertrophic response to this inevitability, as if to preprogram anti-form procedures of falling felt with the desire it resisted: to become ornamental, fetishistic image-objects.

But I think this explanation would be too final, too neat, for Morris’s hybrid activities. Morris was never satisfied with mere self-critical negation. Even at their most self-reflective, his works were also generative, intent on opening up further possibilities, new folds in the fabric. If late felt works like those of the *House of the Vetti* series

69. Robert Morris, “The Present Tense of Space” (1978), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, p. 201.

70. Ibid.

71. Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects” (1969), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, p. 59.

72. Ibid., p. 60.

73. Robert Morris, “The Present Tense of Space” (1978), in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, p. 199.

74. Ibid., p. 202.

75. Robert Morris, “Golden Memories: W. J. T. Mitchell Talks with Robert Morris,” *Artforum*, April 1994, p. 88.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.



sought to absorb the fetishizing powers of the photograph, they also made affirmative use of them, for clearly at this stage, Morris came to see the operations of anti-form as creative, as bearing a kind of reproductive, procreative potential. The goal, I think, was to place these emblems of procreation in real space, so that they might assemble various substances and processes, including sculptural material, architectural frame, photographic image, and gravitational force, into some new unfolding order. And this hybridity, these fluttering, sensuous fragments completely out of scale with the human body, began to take on a life, a corporeality, of their own. Herein lies one of the unsettling determinations of Morris's fold. If the logic of the fold mandated that all materials and all bodies be merely more or less complicated folds in the same fabric of experience (made up of the same fundamental "monads"), then the organism and even subjectivity (Deleuze refers to the "folds of the soul")—along with its most intimate zones of erotic desire and creation—were themselves mere folds in the fabric as well. The same generative force ran through all materials, making the human subject yet another complex of folds that could, as in Morris's labyrinths of this period, be grafted to others.

Like *Card File* and other "object sculptures," then, Morris's felts might be seen as machine-bodies, devices for folding matter, force, body, and image together into ensembles that appear both self-enclosed and infinitely proliferating. Morris also built proliferation into the way in which both series developed diachronically as well; both consisted of a series of "self-enclosed" experiments (objects that "make" themselves via their own scientific system) that could be end-

lessly repeated in various iterations. Indeed, lead and felt never left Morris's oeuvre. The two materials seemed to develop in parallel, beginning with works like *Untitled (Scatter Piece)* (1969), in which pieces of black felt, lead, wood, and other metals were scattered randomly across the floor of Castelli Gallery. And their modes of making would often return together too, as in the Hydrocal works, which rely equally on the casting procedures and iconographies of fields and ripples developed in the leads as well as the aesthetic of entropy developed in the anti-form works. Morris often mounted his Hydrocal reliefs on felt backing, directly recalling the period of anti-form. In works like *Untitled* (1984), Morris incorporated actual felt pieces



Morris. *Untitled*. 1984. Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery. © 2019 The Estate of Robert Morris/ARS, New York.

into Hydrocal frames too, and in at least one of the Holocaust paintings, he positioned felt between silkscreened image and plaster frame. By this point, then, the erotics of the felts had given way to a zombie resurrection. Still finding ways to fold the frame, to operate in the space where distinct materials, techniques, and image regimes come together, Morris now seemed to view his previous techniques as possessing a deathly but still generative cast, like so many rags and broken tools after the apocalypse. If procreative, theirs had become a deathly creativeness.

In 2014, Morris reflected on the “chthonic” quality of his materials, describing a kind of life story—or life cycle—of *Scatter Piece’s* lead, felt, and metal pieces.<sup>78</sup> During reorganization efforts at Castelli Gallery following the death of its founder, the work, lodged somewhere in storage, was “judged to be scrap and thrown into a dumpster.”<sup>79</sup> Following this fatal misrecognition, the work had to be refabricated for subsequent installations, but because the first iteration had preprogrammed all possible iterations into its



*Morris. Untitled (Scatter Piece). 1969.*

*Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery.*

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indeterminate structure, Morris notes that its status as an artwork was never in question. In other words, the so-called scrap “remained a work of art whether in an exhibition space or stacked up in a storage area, or resting randomly in a dumpster,” or, he goes on, when sitting entropically in a landfill amongst waste.<sup>80</sup> Its zombie life, then, was infinite, proceeding even after its presumed death. The refabricated version was merely “a twin to the first one which most likely lies buried somewhere in New Jersey,” where its felt components might have been taken up by some other nonhuman maker, in order to line “the burrow of who knows what creature.”<sup>81</sup> Even in death, then, a generative creativeness might take hold. “I am reminded by these Scatter Pieces,” Morris concludes, “that every work

78. Robert Morris, “A Few Thoughts on Bombs, Tennis, Free Will, Agency Reduction, the Museum, Dust Storms and Labyrinths,” in *Red and Black Black and Red* (New York: Castelli, 2014), p. 13.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

I've ever made enacts the ritual of memory and mourning.”<sup>82</sup> In 2013, he made a “burrow” of his own. Titled *Breather*, the work consists of a mound of gray felt pieces fully covering a mechanized actuator that, lunglike, slowly expands and contracts. A pile of rags that breathes like a body, here is an artwork that does not—even cannot—die but instead goes on.

#### *Childhood Memories*

Begun in 1973, Morris’s *Blind Time* drawings represent the third key series that the artist restaged at different points, and in different setups, over the course of his career. Though *Blind Time* would gain in complexity with each new round of drawings, its basic parameters remained the same. With eyes shut or blindfolded, Morris used graphite- and pigment-covered hands to make black, gray, or brown marks on a blank white surface, often drawing with both hands at once. Each drawing followed a carefully prescribed series of tasks or “protocols” clearly described in a handwritten caption, and each had to be executed within an allotted period of time. Forgoing the use of a clock or timer, Morris would have to judge the passing of time in the blind, as it were, synching time to the rhythm of gesture and thought. After deeming that the correct amount of time had elapsed, Morris would visually inspect the drawing, indicating in the accompanying caption the “estimated time error”—that is, the assumed discrepancy between the allotted time and the actual time of execution. By his death in 2018, Morris had produced hundreds of drawings in this manner.

*Blind Time*’s drawing method was one way, Morris no doubt reasoned, to prioritize the gesture as an independent act over and above the author—that is, to prioritize it as a movement in itself that makes use of (but is not produced by) the artist and his tools. Vilém Flusser has theorized the painterly gesture similarly, viewing it as a kind of fluid matrix that generates “‘the Painter’ and ‘his material,’” rather than “the other way around.”<sup>83</sup> Discrete entities like matter, painter, or brush do not produce but “follow from the gesture.”<sup>84</sup> *Blind Time* reveals the spectator to be the third being generated by the gesture—a being whom Morris curiously aligns with the artist. Created in the space of darkness and deposited in the light only afterwards, each drawing exposes itself to the vision of artist and spectator in a parallel fashion: Both encounter—that is, *see*—its status as an image only *after* its production. A spatial and temporal stutter or delay, then, is inherent to the *Blind Time* procedure, a delay that materializes by virtue of Morris’s careful rewiring of the body’s sensory apparatus, namely, his decoupling of touch from

82. Ibid. Jeffrey Weiss has recently described a related approach, regarding the refabrication of previous works. Morris, Weiss notes, “referred to a transmutation of the soul of a work from one object to another.” See Weiss, “Robert Morris (1931–2018),” *October* 168 (Spring 2019), p. 171.

83. Vilém Flusser, “The Gesture of Painting,” in *Gestures* (1991), trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 67.

84. Ibid.



*Morris. Blind Time I. 1973.*  
 Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery.  
 © 2019 The Estate of Robert Morris/ARS, New York.

the dominance of sight. From within this moment of spatiotemporal suspension, Morris experimented with various ways to rewire the flow of time, and once again, a machinic consciousness was required.

The works in the first series, *Blind Time I* (1973), explored the ramifications of blindness on the coherence of the body as a mark-making apparatus. Demanding similar or competing marks from the left and right hand simultaneously, many test the body's ability to record its bilateral symmetry while deprived of sight. The resulting works presage the extreme symmetry and patterned gestures of some of the *Burning Planet* frames to come. As Morris developed the series, the form of his blindness became more complex, more dense. Some of the earliest drawings involved complicated sequential tasks, requiring delays and stutters within the prescribed period of blindness. In certain cases, Morris forced his right side to mimic marks already produced by the left, allowing a brief moment of vision before plunging back into the darkness. In these instances, the "blind time" of drawing became a dense, hybrid field, instituting a kind of multiplicity of authors occupying different times but paradoxically inhabiting the same body. In other words, the time of blindness came to be a state less of control than of possibility, of testing alternative, self-differing models of authorship and temporality. However, the *Blind Time* drawings made sure to frame this multiplication of authorship as a troubled one. This was demonstrated by one particularly fraught suite of drawings from 1976. For these, Morris commissioned a woman who was born blind to produce drawings for him. Operating under the pseudonym AA, the maker of the drawings later contested the authorship of the works and proposed alternate intentions and directions for the series. Due to the tensions within this

antagonistic collaboration, the series was never completed, and only a few drawings have been exhibited.<sup>85</sup>

By *Blind Time III* (1985), Morris had begun to incorporate two new factors into the instructions that guided his drawings. First, he introduced operations of the “imagination” and related concepts of “metaphor” and “narrative” into his protocols. And second, he began to consider scientific concepts of space-time. To create one six-minute drawing, for example, Morris included opaque, cognitive operations, demanding that “the two hands attempt to plot the imagined visual field” and use “pressure” as an index of the movements of this imaginative activity. Below these instructions, Morris wrote lyrically about the experience of blind time, understood as a kind of interval between the “not yet imagined and the as yet unseen of the distant future.” Another drawing refers similarly to the “gap” that “inevitably appears in the self’s dedicated pursuit of its own narrative.” Still other captions reference the “nexus” of forces—made up of “language, tradition and culture”—that bear on the construction of temporality. He writes in one of his search “for a metaphor” that can describe the dwindling of “possibilities” for “an imagined but un-occupable future.” Esoteric scientific formulae and statements regarding entropy, decay, the behavior of photons, or “the uncertainty principle” pepper these reflections. By the mid-1980s, the negation of visual mastery and its attendant links to masculinist control, then, coincided with an affirmation of mixed temporalities. For Morris, the blindness of time—its essential unforeseeability—could be an arena of possibility, a place of blind imagination in which the unseen might grapple with the essential unforeseeability of the future. “The gesture not only reaches from the present into the future,” Flusser writes, “but also brings an anticipated future back into the present and returns it to the future: the gesture is constantly monitoring and reformulating its own meaning.”<sup>86</sup>

Soon Morris would begin to incorporate the temporal movements of desire, memory, and mourning into the mix as well, calling up memories of childhood or imagining the future memories of his own daughter while producing marks. In one caption from 1991, for instance, Morris writes of drawing while “remembering the time of my father’s dying”; another has him trying to remember, via his blind bodily gestures, the first Cézanne painting he encountered as a young artist.

Though they become explicit only in 1991, the procedures of mourning, I would argue, were intrinsic to the project from the beginning. They are present in the basic structure of *Blind Time*’s temporal, even traumatic, delay, a space of removal and difference staged within the fabric of the body itself. The task had always been to mark time from within a delay in experience, a trait *Blind Time* shares not with drawing but with the technology of photography. Morris’s blindness, then, may run parallel to the darkness of the black box of the camera, that blind eye for

85. For more on this antagonistic collaboration, see Eve Meltzer, “Turning Around, Turning Away,” pp. 71–116.

86. Flusser, “The Gesture of Painting,” p. 65.

recording whatever is put in front of it. Inscribed within the dark interiority of the apparatus, the photograph's "message without a code," Barthes tells us, requires a caption, for without it, the image fails to signify.<sup>87</sup> *Blind Time* drawings include captions too, as well as all the elements of the photographic process. Most of all, they register, within the body itself, that inherent loss, that delay, written into the photograph's registration of a moment in the instant of its passing.

It is this uncanny, mournful temporality, instilling in the present the knowledge that it is always already past, that Barthes locates at the very core of the photograph. The photographed present is, he writes famously, what "will have been."<sup>88</sup> And yet Barthes insists that, by virtue of its indexical quality, the photograph carries a shred of the physical reality of the past forward into the present, instituting that very intimate experience of communion Barthes names the *punctum*. This physical link joins the present to an even deeper loss, the knowledge that the photograph is only ever a mere scrap seized from the infinity of details that is the material reality of the past. This is what Barthes calls the "blind field," the infinity of details, of narratives, of experiences that make up the life-world excluded from, or framed out of, the photograph.<sup>89</sup> *Blind Time* diagrams a similar effect, but the project seeks, I think, to incorporate this unseeing into the body in the hope that new motions and gestures might be generated from it. These works, in short, show the body negotiating, grappling, with the apparatus of the camera, in the hope that some new configuration of sense, imagination, and imaging might be performed via this dark collaboration.

Still, if the *Blind Time* drawings shadow photography—and I believe they do—this relationship can only be spoken of in a diagrammatic sense. These works are not photographs, and they do not involve any kind of technological reproduction, despite the fact that a seemingly endless series of images has emerged from the dark space of their production. Rather, the works seem to speak the technology of photography through the language of drawing and thereby through the gestures of the body. If the drawings are records of the body negotiating the photographic process, they are also, I think, attempts to give a body to the camera. This endeavor aligns the drawings with Morris's earlier efforts, in *I-Box* for example, to level artistic consciousness with the consciousness of technology and to see what new orders of production, forces, or resistances might emerge from their mixture. Barthes often referred to the photograph as a carnal link, "a sort of umbilical cord" between the dead and the living, and Morris may have seen the space of *Blind Time* in womblike terms too, generative of a new form of artistic being.<sup>90</sup>

87. See Barthes, "The Photographic Message" (1961), in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 15–31.

88. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 94.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Here, once again, was the artist as a fold, a body enclosed in itself but called on to hybridize disparate temporal rhythms—material, scientific, bodily, mental—and use them to produce a seemingly infinite set of surfaces. The goal was to keep the process moving, to keep production moving, into an unseen future. Once again, self-enclosed but also unending.

In the early to mid-1980s, however, the multiplicity of the future appeared to be under immanent threat by the singularity of the bomb. The result, Morris indicated in “American Quartet,” was a crisis of the imagination, one that strangely highlighted the principle of non-invention that had driven Morris’s work up to that point. If Morris’s “uncreative” mode of working aimed at the infinitely enclosed and the infinitely connective, the bomb promised a deadly culmination, an instant of total global connectivity and internal collapse all at once. To face up to this impossible situation, the 1980s pictures tested, at least in part, whether three major strains of Morris’s oeuvre up to that point—the “object sculptures,” the anti-form projects, and the *Blind Time* drawings—could work through this crisis.

Allegory, that most postmodern technique of appropriation, provided Morris with one potential path forward, allowing him to code his images with multiple significations at once. In the *Burning Planet* paintings and especially in the Holocaust silkscreens of the late 1980s, Morris made one memory crisis allegorize another. We might say, for instance, that these works’ subject matter—the burning, melting bodies, the sublime atmospheres of destruction—spoke of the challenge to memory brought on by unspeakable military calamity, while the works’ method of fabrication—their casting of entropic processes within the frame—indexed anti-form’s own crisis of memory in the face of the photograph and its ability to freeze—to image—all forms of indeterminacy and flow. One failure gives way to another.

This rhetoric of failure was not Morris’s alone; it was, in fact, a founding conceit of Neo-Expressionism’s bathetic return to the paintbrush as an instrument of expression and narrativity. While painters like Kiefer, Fischl, and Schnabel, for the most part, brought back painting to simply resuscitate its masculinist notions of technical mastery and virility, they sometimes tempered this resuscitation by ironizing or flaunting its impotence. Still, the terms of patriarchy—control, mastery, or the lack of it—were still maintained in their works.<sup>91</sup> The position of Morris’s 1980s paintings within this discourse of impotence is complicated. Werckmeister has noted the “gestures of artistic self-gratification,” such as the “masturbating fists” and “modeling hands” encased in the frames, describing how such gestures of “form creation” are “subject to the shock waves of destruction” that pulse through the Hydrocal material and the pictures at their center.<sup>92</sup> Such “fiery panoramas of doom,” representations of a Cold War future, prove “compro-

91. For one example of this tension, see my catalogue entry “Eric Fischl” in Molesworth, *This Will Have Been*, pp. 271–74.

92. Werckmeister, pp. 177/157.

missing [to] the gestures of subversion and protest” represented, for him, by the clawing hands and repeating phalluses of the frames.<sup>93</sup>

Extending this analysis further, we might say that Morris’s *Burning Planet* paintings, like painterly archives, catalogue all of Morris’s patented techniques within their structures—from the castings and fields of the leads to the entropic procedures of the felts—only to depict their bankrupt status in the face of global war. In doing so, we might also find further evidence of Morris’s continued appropriative bent, his urge to fold his tactics together with those of other artists who reflected on the relation of art’s most humble, craft-based strategies—like decorating, casting, and encasing—to global conflict and displacement. One thinks, for instance, of Kurt Schwitters’s unfinished *Merz Barn* wall (1947–48), with its hand-worked plaster, its incorporation of fragments and abject scraps, and its general status as a kind of shelter for some future posthuman subject after the end of history. Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise* (1935–41) is, however, the key reference here. Consisting of handmade reproductions of all the works Duchamp had created up to its fabrication, the work represented an effort to gather a “whole life’s work” within a single “portable museum.”<sup>94</sup> It was made during a period of exile, and as T. J. Demos has cannily articulated, the little dollhouse-cum-archive could serve as a kind of traveling domicile too, a place where Duchamp might commune with the many works that had been taken from him by museum collections and private estates. These works—what Duchamp once referred to as “brothers and sisters”—had to be brought close again, evincing a “filial” desire that Morris also seemed to share when he began to reincorporate his student drawings into works like *Fathers and Sons*, or when he brought the casting techniques of his leads to bear on his Hydrocal frames, themselves entropic riffs on anti-form procedures.<sup>95</sup> These earlier works, it seemed, were “corpses” that now had to be recollected, somehow gathered together and stuffed into gaudy new paintings that could slide comfortably back into current artistic trends.

It would make sense, then, to see these paintings as archival structures themselves, but they are decidedly ironical ones.<sup>96</sup> They seem to register the tension in memorializing an oeuvre that shunned originality and invention and that opted instead for the ceaseless hybridization of existing strategies and techniques. A grotesque, hypertrophic exacerbation of this appropriative aesthetic might prove apt in constructing an archive that would suit Morris’s oeuvre, an archive, that is, of the fold. In a time when (male) painters were mounting pseudo-critical recu-

93. Ibid. p. 177.

94. Quoted in T. J. Demos, “The Portable Museum,” in *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 43.

95. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 45.

96. Okwui Enwezor positioned Morris’s Holocaust works in relation to the “archival” mode in contemporary art, including one work from 1987 in his important exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2008).



perations of originality and authorship, Morris's archives stand out as dysfunctional, broken. Rather than expressive of a corpus, these paintings are mere collections of fragments, "only some bodies."

Which leads us to the most disturbing and difficult facet of Morris's 1980s work: his decision, beginning with the Holocaust paintings of 1987, to display silkscreened images of victims of Nazi death camps. At that particular moment, this decision could only be perceived as a provocation, bringing the photograph to the center of painting and aligning, obscenely, painting's indexical marks with photographic indices of the twentieth century's founding catastrophe. Only two years before, Claude Lanzmann had released *Shoah* (1985), an almost ten-hour film in which Lanzmann articulated, among many other things, an aesthetic of refusal that adamantly rejected the use of archival images related to the Holocaust. The display of any surviving photograph, Lanzmann insisted in his writings at the time, brought with it a set of ethical obscenities: namely, that the horror of the event could be represented at all (let alone physically indexed in the photograph), but also that it could be understood—tamed by meaning, packaged as a message, commoditized—in the present.

Rather, Lanzmann insisted that one had to internalize these impossibilities into the very production of the image, inscribing loss, nothingness, and "disappearance" into the core of an aesthetics of remembrance. "There is nothing left," he wrote, "it is nothingness, and a film had to be made from this nothingness."<sup>97</sup> Loss, erasure: These were the only acceptable tools in Lanzmann's ethical call to refuse representation. *Shoah*, therefore, lodged itself firmly in its own present,



Morris. Untitled. 1987.  
Photo courtesy of Castelli Gallery.  
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Morris/ARS, New York.

97. Claude Lanzmann, quoted in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 92. Originally appears in Lanzmann, "Le lieu et la parole" (1985), in *Au sujet de Shoah: Le film de Claude Lanzmann* (Paris: Belin, 1990), p. 295.

relying only on witnesses and locations filmed during the ten-year research process. Gertrud Koch has described this strategy as a way of short-circuiting the pleasures and possibilities of imagination itself, inserting instead “the presence of an absence in the imagination of the past.”<sup>98</sup>

By these lights, Morris’s appropriation of images of corpses taken during the liberation of the camps constituted yet another sly intervention within some of the most pressing aesthetic debates. While Morris used a range of different tactics to manipulate the images, he was remarkably consistent with many of them. Key to the project was the use of silkscreen, which allowed the artist to enlarge the appropriated images and transfer them onto reflective aluminum surfaces. He often bathed the screened images in washes of luminous purple, green, yellow, and pink pigment. What resulted were dynamic image surfaces that shimmer in response to gallery lighting and the movements of spectators. In certain cases, this expressive paint application also serves to blur surface into content so that piles or rows of corpses become indistinguishable from abstract painterly marks. All things, then, tend to blend into a homogenous fluid, echoing the cast objects and body parts of the Hydrocal frames. Here, the act of organizing paint mimes the task of organizing death, a brutal, grotesque parallel, to be sure. Many of the works subtly manipulate the source material as well, extending rows of bodies, for instance, deep into the horizon so that they are conscripted into performing the technology of linear perspective.

Another painting from 1987 transforms a now iconic photograph of a woman found dead on the grounds of Bergen-Belsen into an eerie and decidedly erotic nude portrait. Indeed, we might call it the portrait of the series as a whole, bringing all of the most difficult questions to the fore. Some of the work’s uncanny sensuality, it must be admitted, had already been present in the original archival photograph, taken during the liberation of the camp. The image shows the emaciated body photographed from above and centered in relative close-up. Covered only by scraps of fabric and arranged (perhaps by the original photographer) in a kind of erotic contortion, the image resembles, uncomfortably, countless female nudes from the Renaissance forward (one thinks of Giorgione, Botticelli, Cabanel, even *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* and *Étant donnés*). From cultural historian Barbie Zelizer, we know that the original image was accompanied by a second one, which portrayed the woman’s two starved children; this latter image was included in *Lest We Forget*, a publication released in 1945 by the *Daily Mail* to provide “evidence” of the camps by printing “the most terrible images ever published.”<sup>99</sup> The image appropriated by Morris, however, was excluded from the book—perhaps, Zelizer suggests, because it “was considered too beautiful and perhaps too erotic to be shown,” a trait that would have unsettled the desire to depict

98. Gertrud Koch, “The Aesthetic Transformation of the Image of the Unimaginable: Notes on Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*,” *October* 48 (Spring 1989), p. 22.

99. See *Lest We Forget: The Horrors of Nazi Concentration Camps Revealed for All Time in the Most Terrible Photographs Ever Published* (London: Associated Newspapers, 1945).

her “only as the victim of brutality.”<sup>100</sup> For Morris, she continues, this “naked beauty” could be reframed “as the reality marker in his depiction of a beautiful woman innocently asleep under neon and strobe lights.”<sup>101</sup> In other words, there was something uncanny or threatening about the foregrounding of sexual desire in the original photograph, as if the image made clear how the early years of evidence-gathering may have held an underlying sexual motivation; how, that is, the desire for images of the trauma had, in certain cases, been visually transformed into an uncomfortable form of sexual desire.

It was precisely this type of violent transformation that Adorno warned of already in 1962. “The so-called artistic representation,” he writes, “of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite.”<sup>102</sup> In 1987, Morris must have also shared this sense that even the most faithful image of suffering inevitably positioned the viewer at a safe, voyeuristic remove from the violence of the original event, transforming catastrophe into pornography and thereby wounding the victims once again. But rather than refuse the image, as Lanzmann did, he spectacularized its effects via a number of subtle manipulations. Cropping the image slightly, Morris removed much of the earth surrounding the woman’s body, bringing her forward in a more portrait-like, almost vertical orientation. The result is a body that seems to float in an erect position, somehow suspended in the soup of objects cast into the frame, which serve to replace the excised ground in the photograph. Morris also doubled the torn fabric covering the woman’s body with an actual felt lining placed between silkscreened image and frame, creating a kind of protective layer of clothing for the photograph itself. Morris, in other words, seemed to want to treat the image as a being in need of care, a body that demanded to be resurrected but one that needed to also retain the traces of violence, erotic desire, and censorship that had conditioned its fate. And he seemed to want this image to be indexed or embodied in the present, either by connecting it to the physical materials of felt and frame (which conspire to make a kind of receptacle for the imaged body) or by animating it via the luminous washes of colored paint that respond to the spectator’s angle of vision. In this, he shared something with Barthes when, in *Camera Lucida*, he wrote of the need to maintain the “madness” of the photographic index, its carnal mixture of deathliness and vitality.<sup>103</sup>

When the Holocaust works were first shown in New York at Castelli Gallery, many, including critic Corinne Robins, were scathing in their assessments of Morris’s “baroque work.” The series, Robins wrote, “goes beyond taste, and calls attention to

100. Barbie Zelizer, “Gender and Atrocity: Women in Holocaust Photographs,” in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 258.

101. *Ibid.*

102. Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 312–13.

103. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 113.

itself as expensive merchandise.”<sup>104</sup> Only cynical capitalization remained, evoking works that “intend to sell the Holocaust as subject matter to be installed over the sofa.”<sup>105</sup> It seemed that Harold Rosenberg’s warning to the Abstract Expressionists back in 1952 had come to pass. Their legacy had, Robins implies, resulted in mere “apocalyptic wallpaper,” submitting not only to the regime of commodity production but also to the feminized—and within the problematic gender politics of 1950s culture, nonartistic—practice of interior decoration.<sup>106</sup>

Following such assessments, one may be tempted to see all of this as the hubris of an artist remaking founding historical traumas of the twentieth century into narcissistic allegories of the failures of his corpus. But we may also see this as a test. The 1980s work seemed to query whether the “folds in the fabric” of Morris’s variegated oeuvre could face up to a tear in the fabric of imagination. Never much interested in the inventiveness of the human author, Morris’s various bodies of work—the “bodies” that made up his corpus—were always more engaged with the nonliving imagination and agency of his aesthetic setups themselves. His way of working, then, might prove ideal in testing whether a deathly form of creation could go on producing within a culture that had found ever more efficient ways to make death into a form of production.

Indeed, Morris’s work had always sought a kind of deathly unfolding that could reduce the agency of the human in favor of objects’ own inexhaustible, infinite ability to attach themselves to other works, artists, and ideas. Thus, techniques that traditionally proclaimed the agency of the human subject—gesture, for instance—had to be refused, or at least, as in the *Blind Time* drawings, deconstructed, then reformatted and reconnected to the body in ways that made it just one node in a matrix of production. In these works, the blinded artistic self could be split and multiplied into two or more moments of production and reception, and in certain cases it could constellate, in loaded ways, to be sure, discrete bodies (as in the AA suite). Thus, while Neo-Expressionism aimed to resurrect singular images of artistic expression (impotent or not), Morris sought, with *Blind Time*, to submit himself to a type of gesture founded in the affirmation of multiplicity, productive of a surfeit of images detached from the author that nevertheless keep unfolding according to their own hybrid temporality.

After *Blind Time*’s reconfiguration of the gesture, the “decorative,” it seemed, was a logical next step. Morris put it to work as the governing principle of his “late style,” specifically in the *Burning Planet* and Holocaust series, both of which trafficked in the repetitions and ornamentations of the decorative mode. An anti-gestural, mechanical mode of making that Morris, if we remember, saw as the “apt” mode for a present without “imagination,” the decorative could stand for

104. Corinne Robins, “Robert Morris: Death and Picture Frames,” *Arts Magazine*, May 1988, p. 75.

105. *Ibid.*

106. Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters” (1952), in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon, 1959), p. 34.



*Morris. Untitled. 1987.  
Photo courtesy of Castelli  
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New York.*

“escape.”<sup>107</sup> It was a method “on the side of Thanatos,” representing “the ultimate response to a pervasive death anxiety.”<sup>108</sup> It was also, he wrote, citing Alois Riegl, “a kind of genetic code” that could describe the “evolution of transpersonal stylistic change.”<sup>109</sup> Seeing the decorative as a transhistorical, uncreative form of making that repeats and reworks given motifs again and again, he may have looked on the decorative as the endgame, the final path open to his principle of non-invention. It was not only submission, then; it was also a continuation, even a fulfillment, of the appropriative and multiply authored tactics of “agency reduction” underlying his work from the leads forward. The decorative was, at least for him, that gesture that could subsume the artist’s imagination within the creativeness of the form itself, passed on through the ages. The result might be a form of creativeness, of reproduction and procreation, grounded in a kind of deathliness: a zombie creativeness that could, in its own way, survive.

107. Morris, “American Quartet,” p. 254.

108. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

109. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

It was a principle of Morris's "late style" to fold the previous materials and techniques of his corpus—from the leads to the felts—into this decorative mode. And thus in the Holocaust paintings we have all the materials and techniques of the past decades brought together as decorative details—the cast limbs and waves, the felt lining, the entropic iconography. Such is one aspect of "late style" as Adorno defined it: a "deserted landscape" consisting of "masses of material" that refuse to cohere but instead flee the work of art in a violent, "irascible gesture."<sup>110</sup> But whereas Adorno insisted on the fragmentary nature of these material deposits, Morris's 1980s paintings force wholeness, fitting the fragments of his corpus back together so that they resemble, at least in structure, those most traditional forms of easel painting or altar construction. This, however, can only be seen as a false, broken wholeness, a coherence that serves only to accentuate its fragmentary character, its status, in short, as an archive. No artist present here, only a collection of the materials and forms that once kept the corpus moving.

Building on Adorno's text, Edward Said has written of "late style" as enduring "*for itself*, its own sake."<sup>111</sup> He writes that "one cannot really go beyond lateness, cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness."<sup>112</sup> Lateness can only go on, keep ending. While the 1980s might have initiated a prolonged late period in Morris's work, its self-quotations signal a recursive structure too, a folding that had always been present from the beginning. The late work was a continuation of the "folds in the fabric," and it was also a redoubling of those efforts, a convulsion in the folds. The challenge was not to end the folds but to keep them going by refolding them all yet again.

Still, these 1980s paintings are difficult, not easily redeemed. And perhaps they shouldn't be. "In the history of art," Adorno wrote, "late works are the catastrophes."<sup>113</sup> But they might come into better focus today, in a present when ethnonationalist thinking has retaken the reins of power, operating without remorse in the very countries that faced those founding traumas referenced in the works. They might direct us as we navigate a landscape in which the repulsive, kitsch spectacle of neo-fascism has found new, more refined methods for erasing memory via a flood of images and information. Finally, Morris's paintings might help us determine how to recover the image of suffering through this haze of malice and confusion. As Georges Didi-Huberman has written, following Kracauer's theory of film, it is the present's responsibility to find ways to keep the image of trauma "moving" in the present so that, perhaps, it might produce new folds in the fabric: "Here, if we understand this motion correctly, resides all that we can call an ethics of the image."<sup>114</sup>

110. Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven," p. 566.

111. Edward Said, "Timeliness and Lateness," in *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Vintage, 2006), p. 14; emphasis in original.

112. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

113. Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven," p. 567.

114. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, p. 178.