

**Dennis Cooper** When did you decide to be artist?

**Tom Friedman** As young as I can remember. I always enjoyed spending a lot of time drawing, focusing my attention on that. I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, where my exposure to art was limited to the art books my parents had on their bookshelf, on Picasso, Rubens, El Greco, Walt Disney. I looked at them every so often. Art for me kind of began as a skill. But I guess I always knew I wanted to be an artist.

**Cooper** You toyed with the idea of being a graphic artist or an architect, right?

**Friedman** Yeah. Where I grew up, I had no concept of what an artist was. I assumed you got a job that could earn money. Initially I looked for creative outlets that were more practical, like architecture, graphic design and illustration. Each change was moving towards doing my own art.

**Cooper** You didn't find those forms satisfactory?

**Friedman** I think I had too much of my own stuff to work through, and they weren't ways to work through that. So I decided to go to graduate school and major in studio arts. I went to the University of Illinois in Chicago. I entered this program doing large charcoal drawings that were like Thomas Hart Benton. At the time, the program was very conceptually based, and this language being used to talk about art was so foreign to me. I was forced to address why I was doing these drawings, and it paralyzed me.

**Cooper** How did you proceed?

**Friedman** Being so confused, I tried to find something incredibly basic and simple. I wanted to gain a grasp of what I was communicating, because the way my work had been read was so far from how I was thinking about it. That was the first year – it's a two-year program. The next year when I returned, I



**Early Work**  
1974–94  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable  
Installation, Artist's studio,  
Middletown, Connecticut, 1994

Artist's studio in graduate school, University of Illinois at Chicago  
1989  
l. to r., Tom Friedman, Lois Friedman (the artist's mother)



decided to take everything out of my studio, remove all the stuff that was there. I then boarded up the windows and the closets, painted the entire space white, and made this obscenely white, empty space. There were fluorescent light fixtures on the ceiling that cast a diffuse light, so you really couldn't see the edges of the walls. Did you see the movie *THX 1138*?

Cooper Yeah.

Friedman You know the prison? That's what it was like.

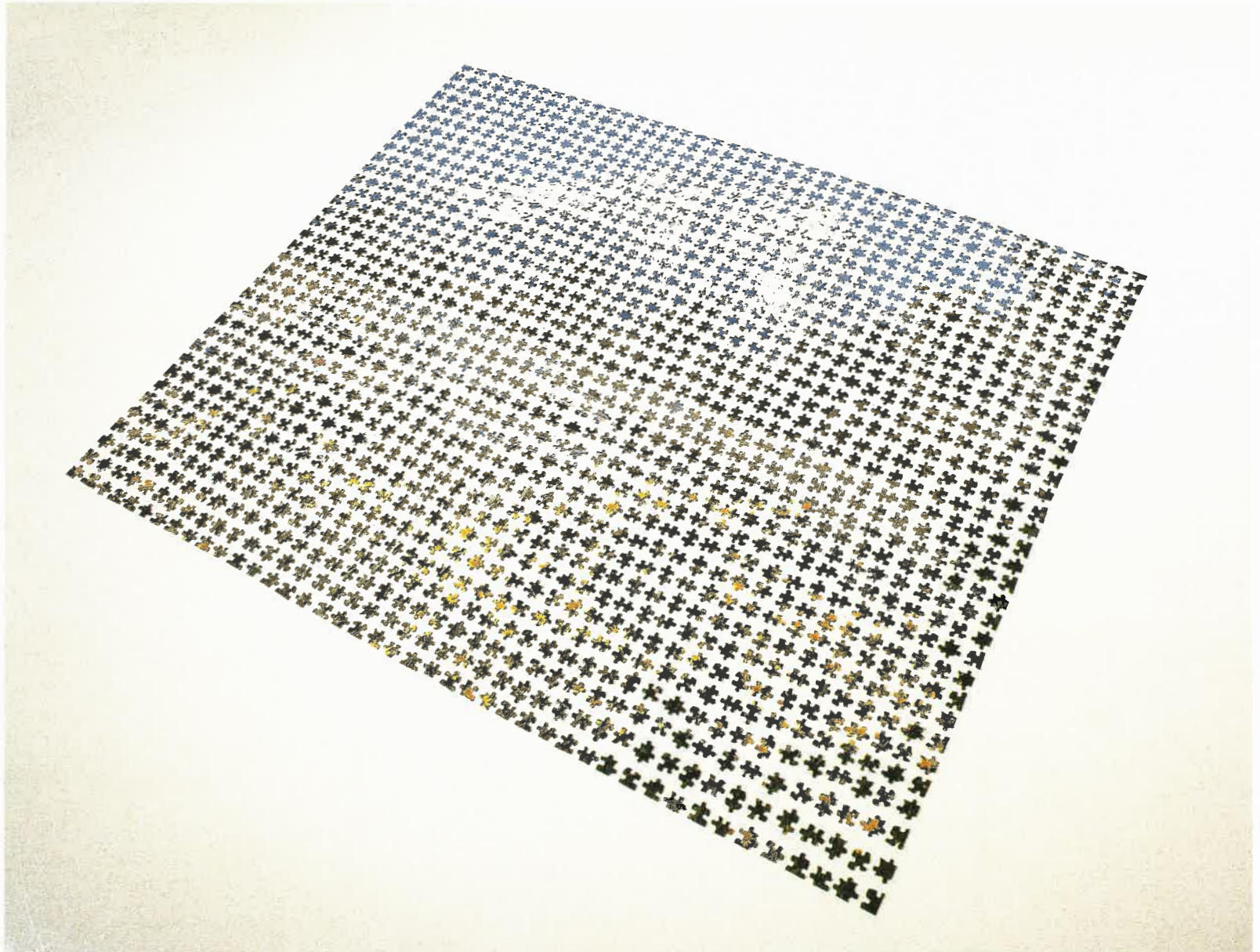
Cooper Scary.

Friedman At this point I sort of dropped the idea of making art; it was more about discovering a beginning. Everyday I would bring an object from my apartment and place it somewhere in the space. The first day I placed a metronome on the floor, and it just clicked back and forth. Or I would sit the whole day, on the floor, looking at it and thinking about it, and asking questions about my experience of it. There was something about this space ... I didn't know at this time the significance of the 'white cube'. For me, this was more like a mental space that had been cleared away.

Cooper A blank?



George Lucas  
*THX 1138*  
1970  
95 min., colour  
Film still



Friedman **Right. A way of trying to understand silence, or nothing.**

Cooper That was a fairly radical shift from Thomas Hart Benton.

Friedman **Well, there were stages towards that simplification. It needed to be radical. I didn't really know what I was doing at the time, but one day I poured honey on the floor, and when I was away from this space someone asked me if I had urinated on the floor. They thought the puddle of honey looked like urine. This incident enabled me to see the potential meaning of this experiment. I started to think of something I could do in the space that related in a way to this activity. I thought about putting together a jigsaw puzzle, as a metaphor for what I was trying to do: to piece something together.**

Cooper Was this an intentionally pure investigation? I mean, you didn't go comparative idea shopping in Chicago's galleries and museums?

opposite, **Untitled**

1990

Jigsaw puzzle

106.5 × 152.5 cm

A jigsaw puzzle completed with a 2 cm space between each piece.

below, left, **Wolfgang Laib**

Pollen from Hazelnut (*in progress*)

1986

Pollen

320 × 360 cm

Installation, capc Musée d'art

Contemporain, Bordeaux

below, right, **Untitled**

1990

Eraser shavings

Dimensions variable

A collection of eraser shavings sprinkled on the floor into a soft-edged circle.



Friedman **No. I went to the store and bought a jigsaw puzzle. I think the faculty was beginning to worry about me. But when I got to a point of almost finishing the puzzle, I thought what I'd do is separate the pieces, like three-quarters of an inch apart from each other (*Untitled*, 1990). So they were in the right order ... as if the puzzle was stretched apart. This seemed to redefine the puzzle in a way. You had to look at each piece to construct the total image. That was the beginning, for me, of thinking about using these materials and manipulating them.**

**Cooper** Can you define how you knew this piece was a success?

Friedman **I think in the way it was read by people, which was very similar to the way I was thinking about it. There was something irrefutable to me about it. It wasn't about a particular thing, but it seemed to branch off into possibilities of meaning. And these possibilities didn't limit it.**

**Cooper** Which de-paralyzed you?

Friedman **I had found a clear point of departure. I then started to look for other metaphors to describe my process. At this time I was involved in meditation, so I thought about a process that could somehow describe that. I thought about erasing, so I started to collect eraser shavings. I wasn't familiar with Wolfgang Laib's pollen pieces until people mentioned them to me as I was erasing. But there was something interesting about the romantic aspect of his work versus the mundane, and the meaning of erasure seemed to have a similar significance. And the gesture of erasing ... the repetition of it became almost like a mantra. After spending hundreds of hours collecting eraser shavings, I sprinkled them onto the floor of this studio space in a soft-edged circle (*Untitled*, 1990). And that seemed to take me to the next level of trying to represent something very specific, striving for clarity and focus ... finding something objective, in a way.**

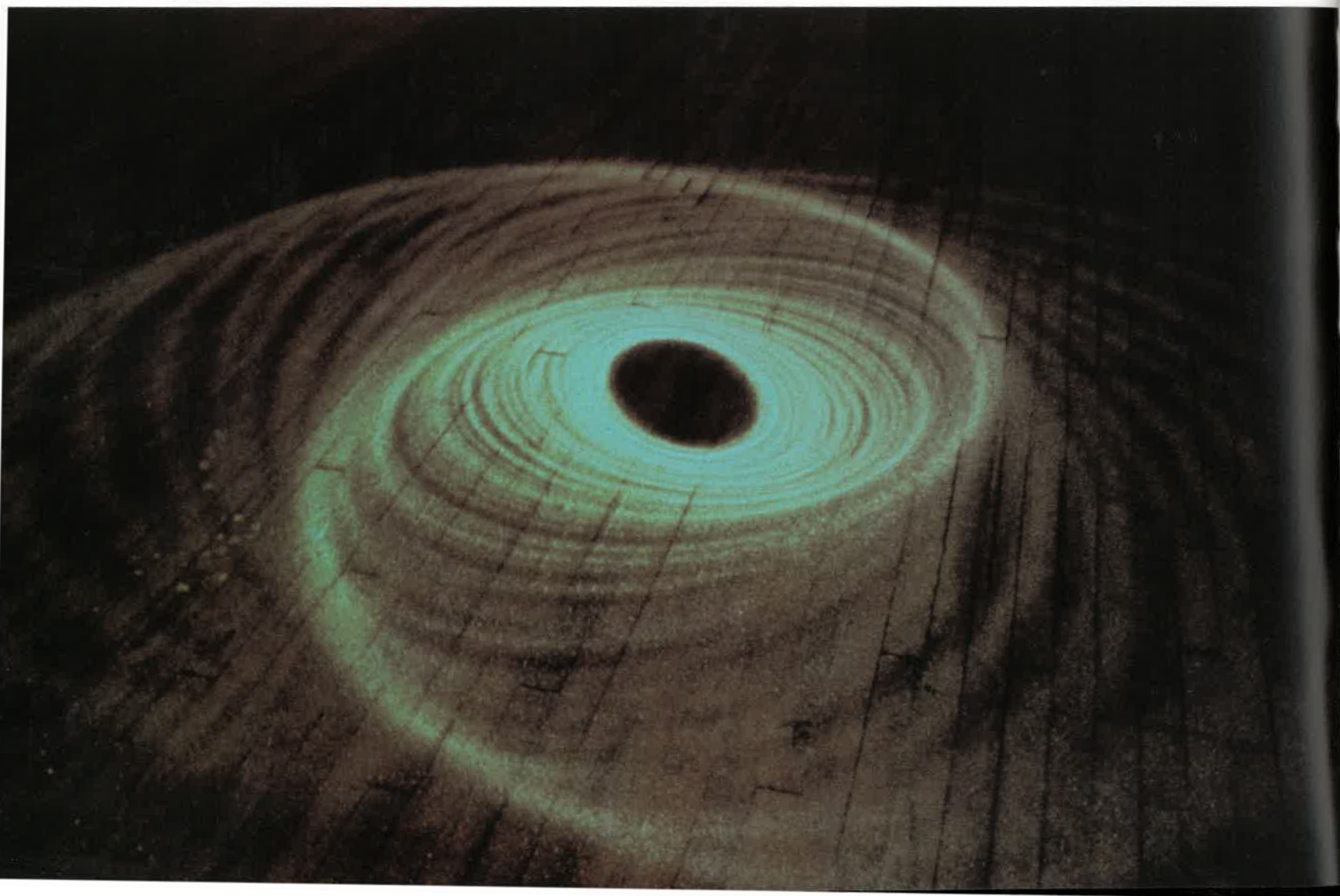


**Cooper** Clarity in what sense?

**Friedman** Through that piece, I identified for myself four basic elements: the material I would choose, the process of altering the material, the form that it would take, and its presentation. I found that there would be an element of logic that would connect them, like the process of erasing with an eraser and achieving this minimal focal point as the idea of erasing.

**Cooper** Was the closed-off, hermetic system interesting to you as well?

**Friedman** Yeah, I really wanted the logic kind of to circle around itself in a way, always come back to itself, and be about itself. I thought more about this circular logic, and this led me to the next piece. I made a pendulum out of a string and funnel. I filled it with laundry detergent and then swung the pendulum into a circular path (*Untitled*, 1990). The funnel sprinkled the detergent on the floor in a spiral pattern. After it made the spiral, I removed the pendulum. So there was the laundry detergent in relation to its form, like a spin cycle of a washing machine, and gravity in relation to a galaxy. One thing that was interesting about using the detergent was the idea of cleansing. I started to look for other materials that had to do with cleaning, or personal hygiene. Because I was thinking about ritual and process, I liked the



connection these materials made between daily mundane rituals and rituals for spiritual purification.

**Cooper** What about the chemical aspect? Detergent is an artificial construct.

**Friedman** This construct for me would flip-flop from a critique to a celebration of itself.

With the idea of looking for these cleaning materials on my mind, the next work came from being in the shower and noticing that a piece of my pubic hair had got stuck on a bar of soap. I looked at it as being very beautiful.

It wasn't enough for me to allow it just to be this event that happened. I wanted to ritualize it and incorporate a type of precision that I was investigating and developing in my process. I decided that I would inlay my pubic hair on the soap in a spiral as precisely as I could (*Untitled*, 1990). It was a way to use this circular logic and make something more absolute. I wanted to take this idea further, so I thought about a material that would suggest a process that is as direct as possible, that has a very clear objective. I got a roll of toilet paper and re-rolled it as precisely as I could (*Untitled*, 1990). The ensuing shape was cylindrical like a roll of toilet paper, but without its cardboard tube. And the fact that it was just one roll, the precision, the geometry and the objectivity of the process seemed to make it more absolute.

**Cooper** Were you sufficiently intuitive about what you were doing at that point for people's responses to function as a kind of language-based, correlative explanation for what you were doing?

**Friedman** I was discovering a lot through other people's understanding of it.

**Cooper** Were you still in school?

**Friedman** I graduated somewhere between the soap with pubic hair and the toilet paper roll. The last piece I did in graduate school was a wall piece where I signed my name on the wall with a felt-tip pen in a spiral (*Untitled*, 1990). I

*opposite*, **Untitled**  
1990  
Laundry detergent  
Dimensions variable  
A spiral of laundry detergent  
created with a pendulum  
consisting of a string and funnel.

*right*, **Untitled**  
1990  
Hair, soap  
2.5 × 10 × 5 cm  
A partially used bar of soap inlaid  
with a spiral of the artist's pubic  
hair.

*far right*, **Untitled**  
1990  
Toilet paper  
h. 12.7 cm, ø 10.2 cm  
One roll of toilet paper re-rolled  
without its tube.





**just kept signing it until the pen slowly ran out, so it created this vortex. In a funny way it was a goodbye piece to school. But it's the same type of logic – a type of identity loss in relation to meditation – that was interesting.**

**Cooper** You haven't mentioned the work's comedy.

**Friedman** **That just sort of happened, because of the nature of these irreverent, dumb materials. They became very beautiful.**

**Cooper** A comedic tone seems crucial to the work's effect, and that tone's modesty in particular seems key.

**Friedman** **Right, it's very deadpan, which is one side. The other side is humility or regression.**

**Cooper** How so?

**Friedman** **It depends on where the interpretation comes from. If it comes from the mundane becoming art, it's comedic; if it comes from art as mundane, it's humility, or regression as an acknowledgement of its most**

*left, White Cloud*  
1989  
Toilet paper  
Dimensions variable  
Installation, University of Illinois at Chicago  
Toilet paper wound around a structure of four strings, each extending from the ceiling to the floor.

*right, Untitled*  
1989  
Toilet paper, string  
Dimensions variable  
Installation, University of Illinois at Chicago  
Toilet paper wound through a structure made of string.

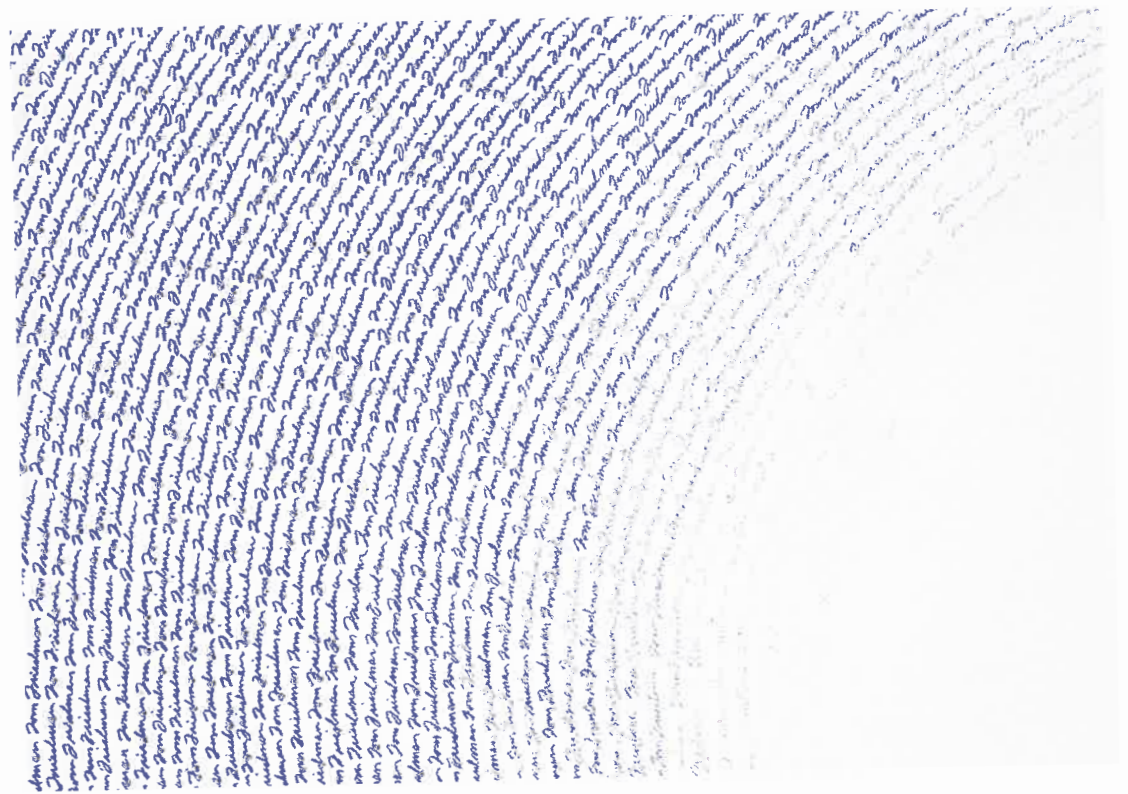
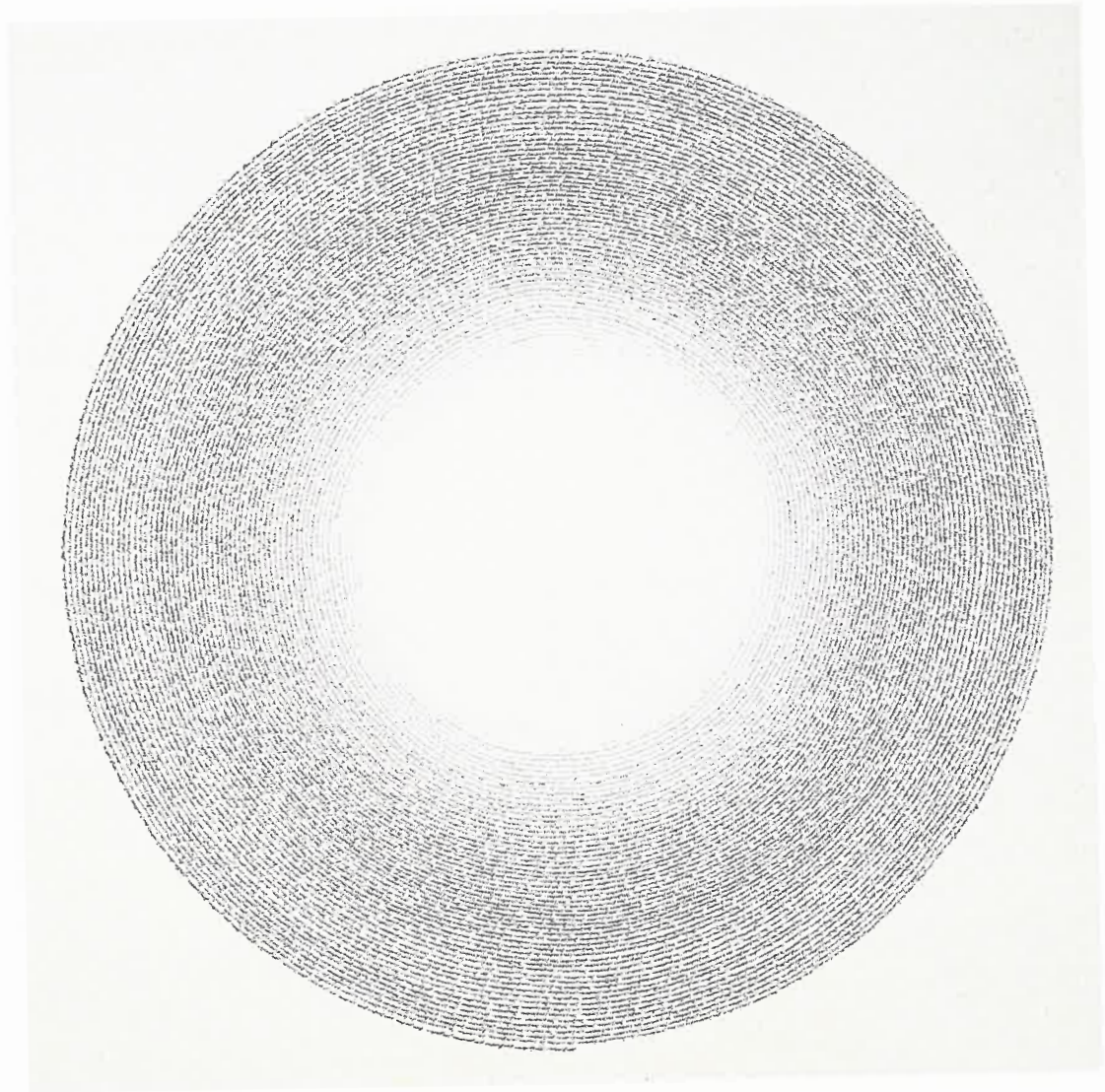
Untitled

1990

Marker pen on wall

Ø 106.5 cm

The artist's signature written on the wall in a spiral until the pen has run out of ink.







opposite, **Untitled**

1990

Bubble gum

∅ 12.5 cm

Approximately fifteen hundred pieces of chewed bubble gum moulded into a sphere. It is displayed wedged in a corner at head height and hangs by its own stickiness.

below, **Jeanne Dunning**

Hand Hole

1993–96

C-print, mounted on Plexiglas, frame

66 × 65 cm

**Judy Ledgerwood**

Desert Rose

2000

Oil and wax on canvas

213.5 × 244 cm

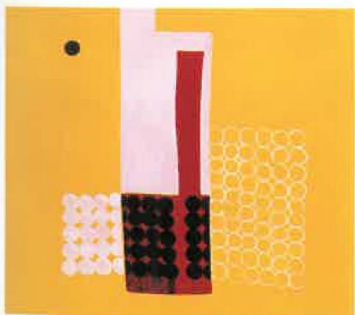
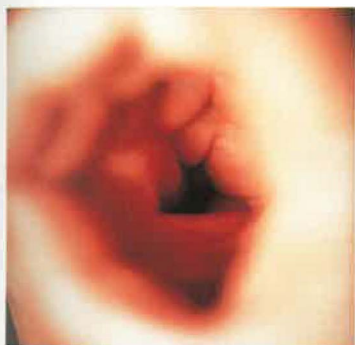
**Tony Tasset**

Jack-o'-Lantern

1997

Painted bronze

43 × 33 × 33 cm



base being. I did this piece where I chewed a bunch of bubble gum, about 1,500 pieces (*Untitled*, 1990), then moulded them into a sphere. I was thinking of how to present it. It didn't seem to make sense to just put it on the ground or on a pedestal. So I thought I'd just wedge it in the corner and let the stickiness of the gum hold it up. I wedged it head height into the corner, and that seemed to make sense – like in school, being punished for chewing gum in class and made to stand in the corner. There was also something about 'bubble-head'. In one respect, bubble-head related to someone who just doesn't have any ideas, there's nothing in there, and also this nothingness in reference to a meditative silence.

**Cooper** Were you living in Chicago at this point?

**Friedman** Yeah; I had just finished graduate school (1990). I needed to make a living. A lot of artists out of school in Chicago would get jobs with the museums as art-movers, or as exhibition assistants at the Field Museum of Natural History, and that's what I did too. I worked there for about a year. I would work nine-to-five, and then come home and do my artwork. You could turn working at the Field Museum into whatever you wanted. If you really put a lot into it, you could eventually design exhibits. But my mind was constantly on my own artwork. So after about a year, I had worked my way down to changing light bulbs in the museum (*laughter*).

**Cooper** Had you already developed a relationship with the gallery Feature Inc.?

**Friedman** While I was in graduate school Tony Tasset, one of my teachers, told Hudson – who runs Feature – to look at my work. Hudson did a studio visit and was interested. He put me in several group shows and then gave me a one-person show (1991).

**Cooper** Was that a smooth transition, in terms of how showing affected your working process?

**Friedman** It seemed like a natural progression for my work, which was about the experience of being with the work. I was interested in making something, and really investigating how its information unfolded to someone looking at it.

**Cooper** There was quite a community of vital younger artists in Chicago in the early 1990s. Were you part of the gang?

**Friedman** I kind of kept to myself in a way. But I knew people who were there, like Jeanne Dunning, Hirsch Perlman, Judy Ledgerwood, Julia Fish and Tony Tasset. But I didn't consider myself in that group.

**Cooper** So you were more interested in the ways in which your work interacted with viewers than in your personal interaction with other artists?

**Friedman** Yeah, in fact the next jump with my work in 1990–91 was thinking more specifically about what the viewer brings to an art experience. The idea of expectations stuck in my mind. There was an expectation to have



Untitled  
1991  
Pillow stuffing  
45.5 x 76 x 76 cm  
Stuffing from a pillow was  
separated strand by strand into a  
pile on the floor.

**something move you, or tell you something you don't know, or generate a thought process.**

**Cooper** Are you talking about generating those things in yourself, or in the viewer?

**Friedman** **The viewer. You know, no one wants to look at art and have it not do anything. I think this came from the unassuming quality already inherent in my work. I thought about the art of downplay which came from my interest in Andy Kaufman's comedy. I had seen his comedy on TV as I was growing up. He did this one performance where he would start telling really horrible jokes. And you could see the audience was thinking, 'Oh, this is so bad!' He would become aware of the audience's disapproval and become almost paralyzed with stage fright. Then he'd start to whimper and cry. The crying would start to slowly take on a rhythm. There were bongos next to him on the stage. And then dancing was added to the rhythm, which led him to the bongos, which he started playing, and then he danced off-stage. It was just unbelievable. After you realized the joke, it just changed your whole perception of what he was doing.**

**Cooper** He played with notions of innocence.

**Friedman** **This innocence seemed to be his point of departure, as if beginning from childhood. But his innocence would always flip-flop and become something else. These ideas sparked my next piece, which was a standard A4 sheet of paper that I poked with a pin as many times as I could without**



ripping the paper apart (*Untitled*, 1991). It was displayed on a wall, hung by the pin that poked it. I liked that initially it seemed like this discarded towel, but if you investigated it you would see the pin-holes, and that would change it from this seemingly casual thing to something very laboured. I thought about that type of phenomenon – what happens between the assumption of casualness and the discovery of intensity.

**Cooper** People have often compared your work to magic tricks, gag gifts.

Friedman **Well, I did magic when I was a kid.**

**Cooper** Was there something in the formal modesty of the magic trick relative to the grand effect it creates that interested you?

Friedman **Yeah, how the modesty or casualness unfolds into illusion and mystery. The casualness sort of mutated into this idea of fragility, fragility defining a kind of presence. My work was already small and fragile, but I wanted to push this further. I did another piece which was a very thin piece of wire, I think picture-hanging wire, that stood perfectly erect protruding from the floor (*Untitled*, 1992). I made it by initially placing the tip of the wire into a small hole in the middle of the floor. The wire would bend over, so I'd cut it**

*right, Untitled*  
1991  
Paper and pin  
28 × 21.5 cm  
Collection, Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Los Angeles  
A piece of paper is poked by a pin  
as many times as possible without  
tearing the paper. It is hung on  
the wall by the pin that poked it.

*opposite, below, Andy Kaufman*  
1949–84



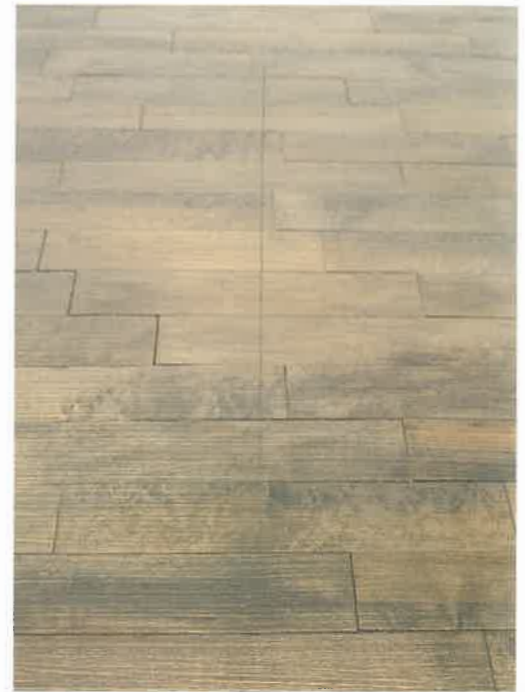
down slightly and straighten it out again. I kept cutting it down and straightening it out to find the exact height at which it could support itself without bending over. It was so sensitive that it would quiver with just the vibrations in the air, and it seemed to be defying gravity. It was almost invisible – you had to be shown where it was. I remember people would come into my studio, and I'd point the piece out to them, and wherever they were, walking around my studio, they'd constantly have to orient themselves in relation to the piece. That's the kind of presence I was thinking about. Because of its fragility, people would have to consider it, hold it in their minds, and be sensitive to it so as not to damage it.

**Cooper** You generally work on the wall or on the floor. What do you see as the differences there?

**Friedman** Whether something was on the wall or the floor was part of the basic elements that I was thinking about from the beginning, in terms of presentation. My decision seemed based on being as direct as I could be. Like the laundry detergent; it seemed like it needed to be on the floor because that was the way it fell. Pinning a piece on the wall, I would think about the line or the direction that someone would travel to see the piece. I didn't want any kinks in that line; I wanted it to be fluid. The decisions seemed based on what was most natural.

**Cooper** What about the shit piece, which used a pedestal (*Untitled*, 1992)?

**Friedman** I was still thinking about scale and fragility, which led to thinking about the smallest amount of material to present that would have the most significance. So I thought that I would use my faeces, and rolled some of it



*above, Untitled*  
1992

Wire

h. 45.5 cm

A very thin, 45.5 cm-tall wire protrudes from the floor. It was made by alternately straightening and cutting it down to find the exact point that it could support itself without bending over.

*left, Untitled*

1996

Paper, pins

Dimensions variable

A wall installation made with hundreds of stars cut from paper. Each star is affixed to the wall, floating by a pin.

*right, above, Untitled*

1990

Balsa wood airplane model  
Ø 91.5 cm

A balsa wood airplane model arranged on the floor with bilateral symmetry, with the exception of several pieces that deviate from the airplane's symmetry.

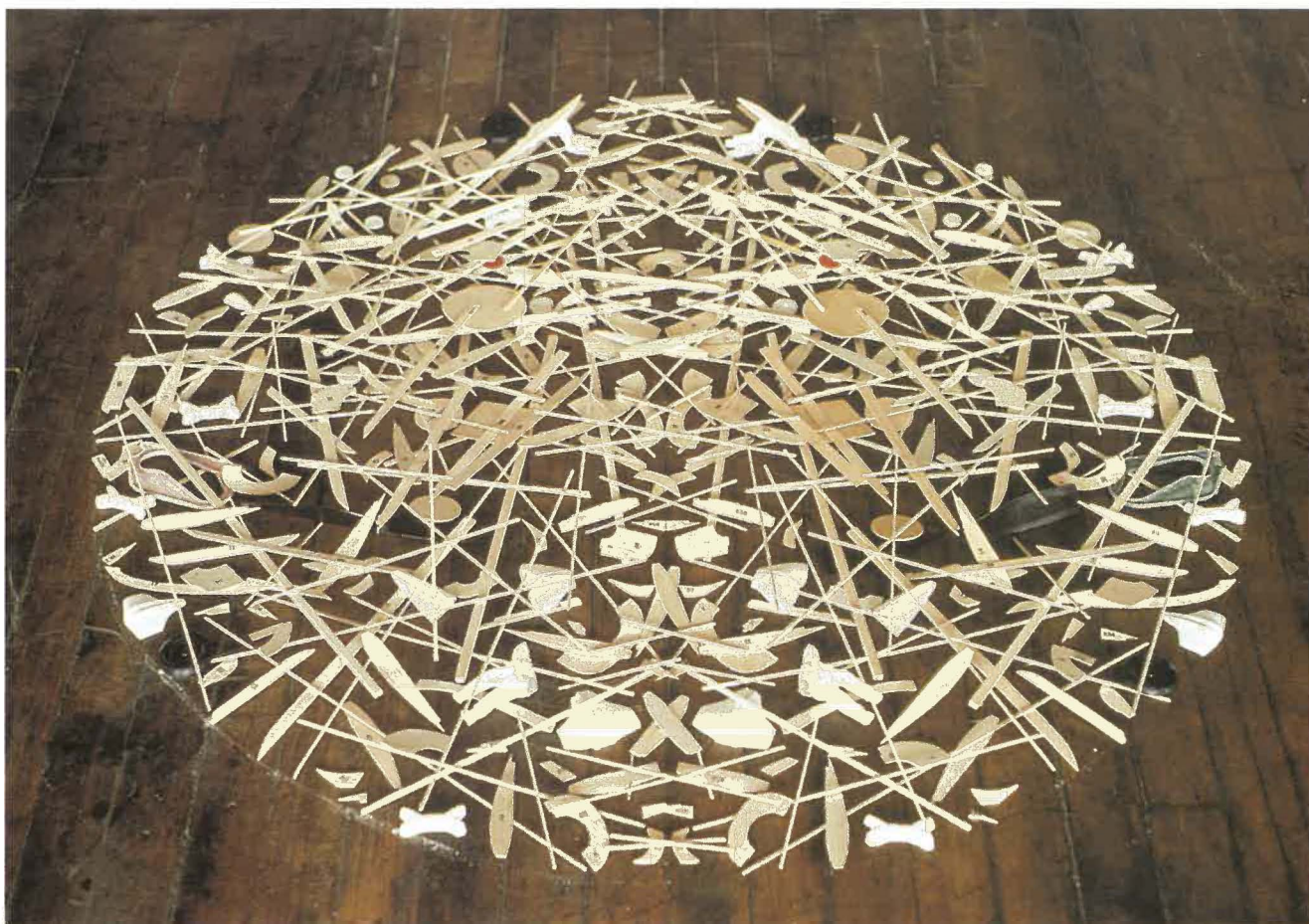
*right, below, Untitled*

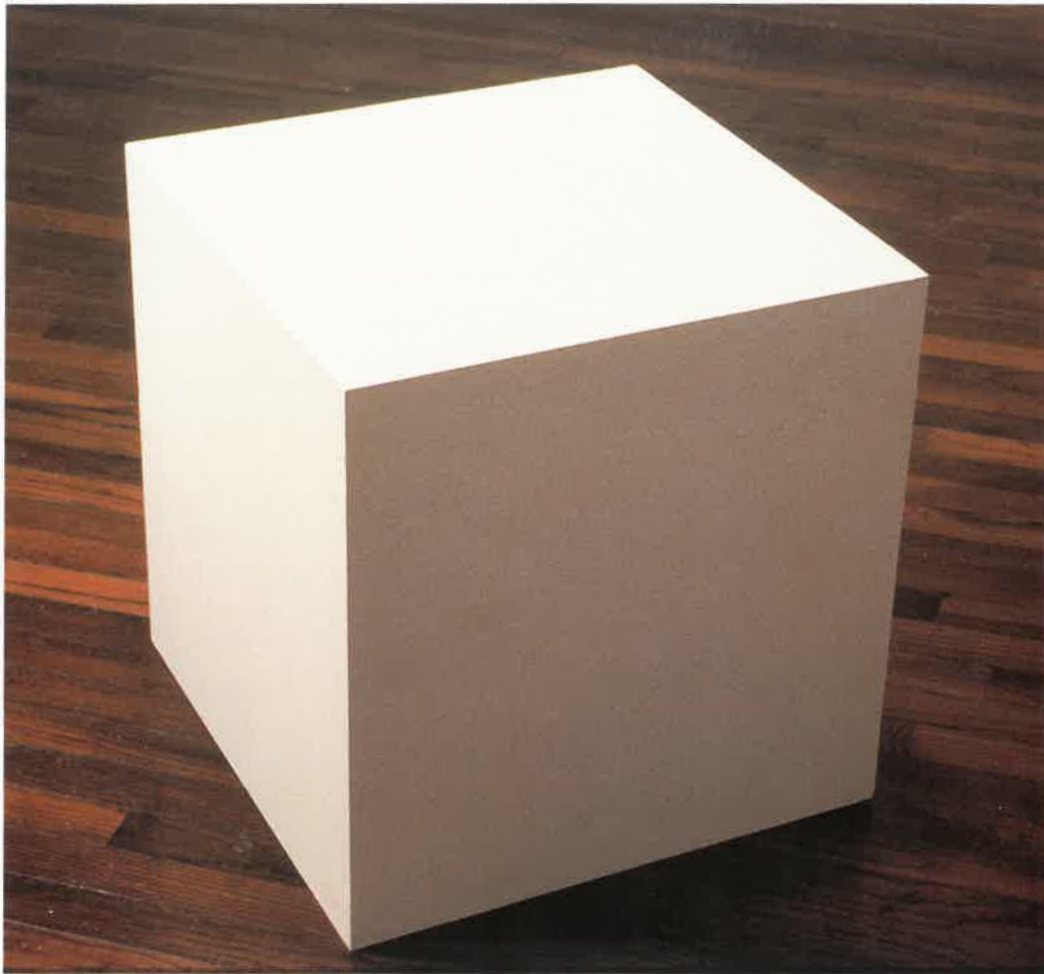
1990

Pick-up sticks

Dimensions variable

Two piles of pick-up sticks; one strewn on the floor, the other laid down carefully to duplicate the first pile.





**Untitled**

1992

Faeces on pedestal

Pedestal, 51 × 51 × 51 cm; faeces,  
∅ 0.5 mm

A sphere one-half millimetre in diameter of the artist's faeces rests precisely centred atop the cubed pedestal.

into a ball. I wanted it to be spherical, I wanted it to have a shape, not just be the material. It was tiny, about half a millimetre in diameter. I presented it on this pristine white cube/pedestal, because I wanted to draw a relationship between this minimalist icon and the shit. I really wanted the size of the shit almost to create some sort of bridge between the idea of it and its physical presence, to kind of merge the two together. Also I wanted to use the size to draw one's focus towards an idea, a very potent idea. I saw the cube and the shit contrast each other but become similar, both requesting a similar experience.

**Cooper** Making art out of your shit can be read as a transgressive act. That might even be the first reading for some people.

**Friedman** That was part of compressing the idea. It was like thinking about shitness through an intense meditative focus.

**Cooper** Still, it's a loaded piece, which must have received a loaded response.

**Friedman** I think people talked more about the stories around it than about the ideas. Like at my opening, some guy who I guess was a bit irreverent sat on the cube, thinking it was an empty pedestal. I saw it happen and ran over to him. He stood up, and I told him to just stay there, while I proceeded to look for the shit on his butt. But I couldn't find it! Luckily I had some spare ones.

**Cooper** A multiple! (*laughter*) Was the shit piece shown in Chicago or New York?

**Friedman** In New York. It was my second show at Feature. Also in that show was a piece titled *Hot Balls* (1992), which was a collection of toy and game balls I stole from various stores in Chicago. I was working on this piece and had 'collected' about two hundred balls over a six-month period. I didn't know what I was going to do with them. I tried to finish the piece by arranging them. Eventually, I decided to steal a really big ball, which sat on top of the smaller balls and became this kind of prize.

**Cooper** Why steal them?

**Friedman** I heard something about how the space shuttle on its next trip into space would take these stamps with it. When the stamps returned to Earth, they would be sold as collector's items. It was interesting that you'd have two of the same stamps, and one would have this history attached to it that made it more valuable than the other one which was visually and even subatomically identical. So I was thinking about presenting information in a piece that wasn't inherent to the physical qualities of the piece, but in what you learned about it, and that would change your perception of it. The fact that the balls were stolen was their attached history. Also the stealing related to the tricks and sleight of hand. It also offset the preciousness of my process.

**Cooper** How would a viewer know they were stolen? I guess the title was a clue.

**Hot Balls**  
1992  
Stolen balls  
h. 51 cm,  $\varnothing$  91.5 cm  
About two hundred balls, stolen from shops by the artist over a six-month period, are arranged on the floor.





Friedman **For that particular exhibition there was a hand-out with empirical information written about each piece.**

Cooper You say that *Hot Balls* involved about six months of stealing and thinking, whereas I assume the shit piece took much less time to realize. How does this time differential distinguish one piece from another, if at all?

Friedman **I think the time element becomes relative to each piece. Even ones that take a minute or a second seem to compress or expand time in a way whereby they become similar to the more laboured pieces. One's idea of an instant or an eternity takes the same amount of time to think about.**

Cooper You don't speak of your work in relation to other artists' work. Who influenced you? Are there artists with whom you feel a kinship?

Friedman **I think my first art experience was when I was younger; my parents had a lot of Picasso books. They had one book of his etchings. When I would look at them I just saw lines; I didn't really see much more than these interesting lines. Then one time when looking at the etchings, the lines became figures and created these images that seemed housed within the whiteness of the page. It seemed to give the white page this solidity. It was really a profound experience for me to see that happen, that sort of shift in perception.**

**When I think about artists who have influenced me recently, I don't distinguish much between one or the other. I think everything I see and consider influences me in some way. It's interesting because art, visual art, doesn't affect me that much for some reason. It could have something to do with the mystery of it, that I feel that I've already gone through it. Music is something that has that mystery for me. It really affects me, and I feel I've been more influenced by music than visual art. It's really odd that I don't get much out of looking at art, because I make objects and I hope people enjoy looking at them.**

Cooper It makes complete sense to me. As a writer, I learn much more from visual art than I do from other writing, at this point. So what music have you learned from?

Friedman **Recently I've been listening to a lot of electronic music. Like Richie Hawtin is one of my favourites. And Richard James and Thomas Brinkman.**

Cooper Who's that?

Friedman **I don't really know much about him, but he's collaborated on some things with Richie Hawtin. And Tom Jenkinson, Stereolab. Glitch music, like Oval or Autechre.**

Cooper How have they influenced you?

Friedman **I've always been interested in the idea of quanta, and the quanta of ideas. I think that electronic music begins to investigate these things, the way sounds and rhythms can be broken down and built up from their**



above, Pablo Picasso  
Man and Woman  
1927  
Etching  
19 × 28 cm

opposite, **Untitled**  
1999  
Spider legs on paper  
1.5 × 30.5 × 23 cm  
A network of spider legs glued to a piece of paper sits atop a pedestal.

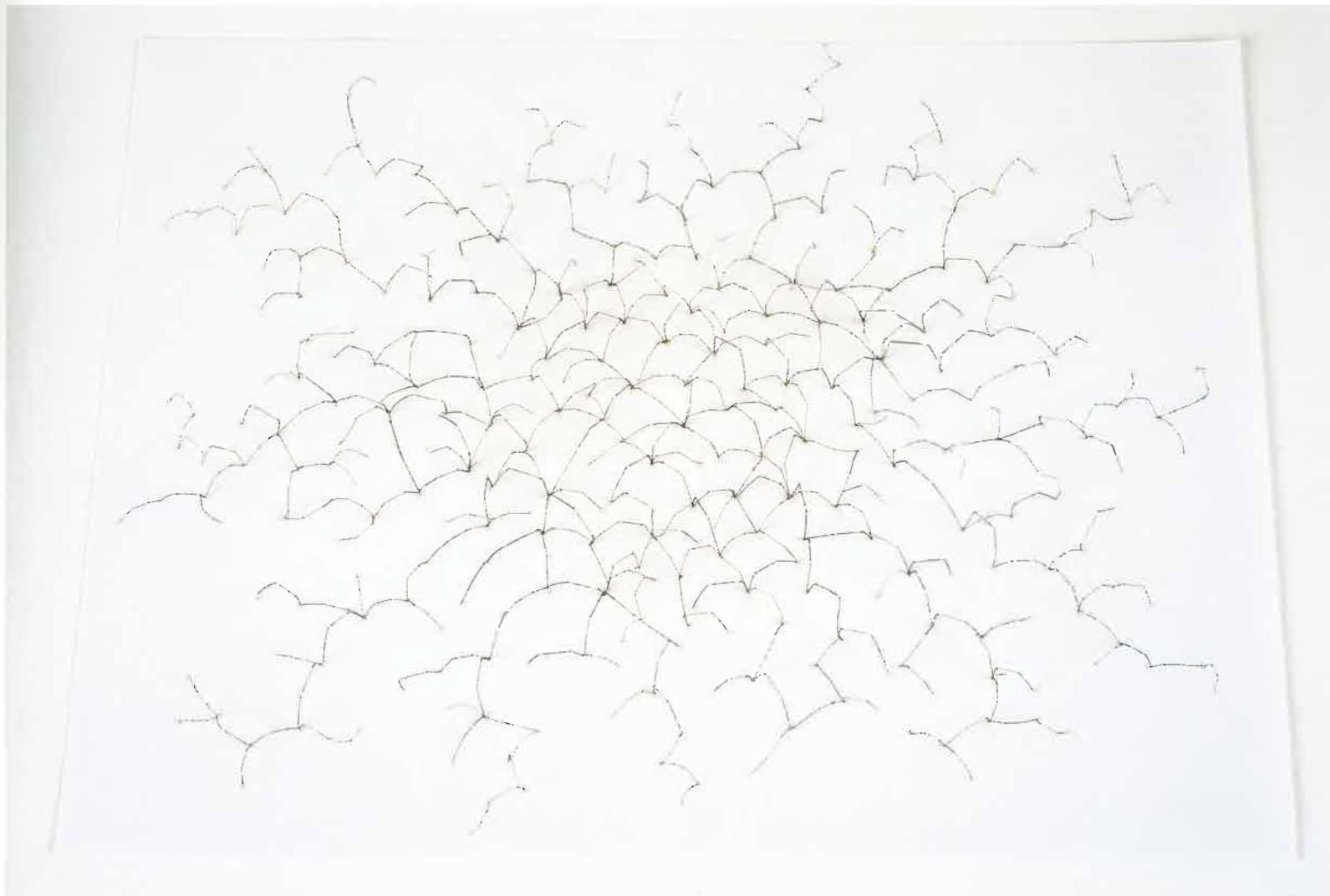
**smallest part.**

**Cooper** Do you think about the way their work diverges from traditional musical structures?

**Friedman** **I think of it more as pattern and texture, the way different patterns and textures work off each other. I mean once you start dealing with electricity you begin to enter into thinking about synaptic functions, how one constructs thought or thinking based on electrical impulses, and how these impulses affect the body.**

**Cooper** Have you consciously tried to translate musical principles into visual principles?

**Friedman** **For some reason, when I think about an idea I think about it as a physical thing. I think about it as a form that has dimensions, shape, pattern and some sort of structure, or the fluid structure of music. I'm interested in some sort of conceptual aesthetic. It's not so much what the ideas are, but what they look like, and where they are located in relation to each other, similar to the aesthetics of sound.**





*left, Untitled*

1996

Monitor, laserdisc and player,  
pedestal

142 x 51 x 51 cm

A 33 cm colour television with its antenna up sits on a pedestal presenting what seems to be colour static and static sound. The static is an animated sequence of images of candy sprinkles. The sprinkles were poured onto a computer scanner, scanned, shuffled around, scanned again, shuffled again and so on. About one thousand different scanned images of the sprinkles were made into a video loop and transferred onto laserdisc. The static sound is a recording of the sprinkles being shaken in a cake tin. The laserdisc player is hidden in the pedestal.



**Cooper** Is there signage of that thinking in your sense of colour?

**Friedman** Yeah. When I work on a body of work, each piece tends to take on a distinct colour identity. Like in my most recent work, the biological colouration of the mutilated figure (*Untitled*, 2000, see pages 70–71), in contrast to the grey of the robot (*Untitled*, 1999), and then the white of the movie projector (*Untitled*, 1999).

**Cooper** Maybe I'm wrong, but it seems to me that your most recent work involves a more intensive and varied use of colour. I've read that you consider your process to have evolved from a largely intellectual process to a more emotional one. Is there a connection there?

**Friedman** Yeah, because I started to think about my work more in the background of my mind. I'd sort of plant an idea in my head and then something would come from that. For me it's a new type of thinking process: not primary thinking, but allowing something to just sort of develop and happen in the background.

**Cooper** Why do you characterize it as emotional?

**Friedman** Because it's not an intellectual process, which is more a foreground thought process. Happening in the background, it begins to introduce and be affected by a psychology.

**Cooper** In some way, psychology and poetry are opposites. Psychology seeks meaning in the trajectory of one's past experience, and poetry suggests meaning is impossible, and can only be conjured. How is it that your work seems to have become more psychologically acute and more poetic simultaneously?

**Friedman** I think in my latest body of work the idea of cinematography has filtered in. This idea was somewhat the catalyst for my March 2000 show at Feature. When I make a body of work I try to create a piece that represents a protagonist or a catalyst for things to happen. And the movie projector piece was the catalyst for this exhibition. In a sense, I saw the other pieces in the exhibition to be apparitions created by the projector. Looking at the way my mind works, I was using film as a request or a reference to the cinematographic experience, the layering of different types of represented reality. Because the projector is all made of white paper and the film is paper, it's like a projection of itself. I know that the shape of the film format isn't a square, but I can relate the square to it, and thinking of these as minimalist squares going through this cinematographic type of filter I see as like a shift in consciousness in the way people look at things now.

**Cooper** Because of film, because of the computer, because of ...

**Friedman** All that stuff. And because of the narratives attached to our consumer landscape. Like one recent piece involves nine cereal boxes that are fused together to make one large cereal box (*Untitled*, 1999). It took me a while to figure out how to do this, but it's based on matrices. It's kind of like if

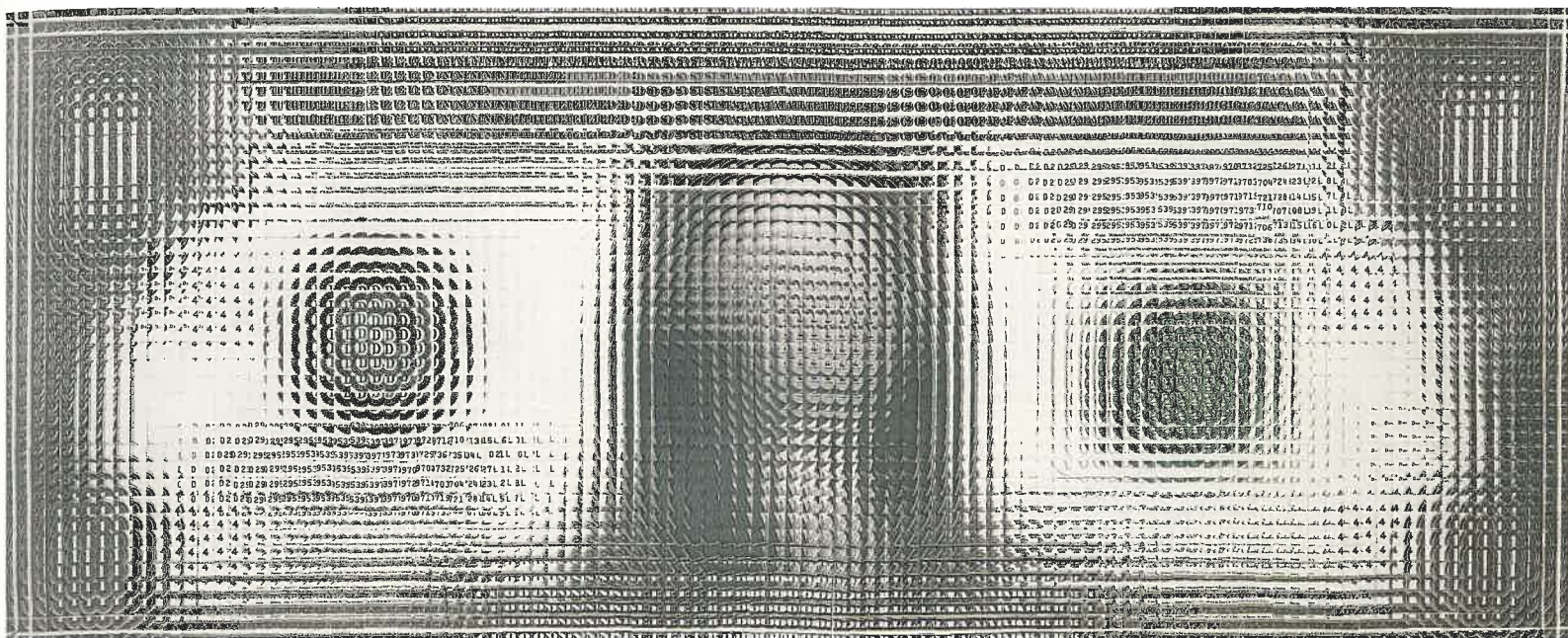
*opposite, left, Untitled*  
1999  
Cardboard, Styrofoam balls  
254 × 76 × 56 cm  
A robot made with cardboard and covered with Styrofoam balls.

*opposite, right, Untitled*  
1999  
Paper  
160 × 38 × 76 cm  
A movie projector made from paper sits atop a paper table.



*left, Untitled*  
1999  
Cereal boxes  
79.5 × 54 × 17 cm  
Nine Total cereal boxes cut into  
small squares and combined to  
make one large box.

*opposite, Untitled*  
1999  
Dollar bills  
35.5 × 89.5 cm  
Thirty-six one-dollar bills  
combined to make one large  
dollar.



you wished to fuse two material objects together, you'd take the first atom from one object, then connect the first atom from the second object, then the second atom from the first object, and so on. But instead of using atoms I used squares. The squares are combined to construct the total image. I was thinking about the squares like the frames of the projector. In a film, as you move from square to square the image is displaced a bit. And there's a money piece (*Untitled*, 1999) based on the same principle, except it's done with thirty-six dollars. It's a grid of six by six. I was interested in the relationship between the static object and time, and the displacement of your mind continually looping and thinking about the static object. Also, in thinking about fantasy, what obviously comes into play is that separation between real space and mind space, and ideas have this kind of elusive nature to them in mind space. But the idea of a concrete space sort of brought me back to thinking about my white studio space in grad school. It became this clear space in my head where I could put things. So now I'm interested in that edge between the mind space and the real space, which sort of informs these images. They have a solidity inherent in the materials they're made of that grounds them, in a way, like the robot. But they are also like apparitions; they just appear but they are not real.

Cooper Are you interested in the paranormal?

Friedman I love reading conspiracy theories, things like that.

Cooper You like the *X-Files*?

Friedman Oh yeah, I love that kind of stuff. I think there was a point where I thought about the rules of thinking, all the rules that I've sort of inherited, and I really tried to lay those aside, in a sense. Like I'd give this book on conspiracy theory to someone, and their first comment would be, 'Do you believe this stuff?' For me that question of believing it or not is not the point. I mean the fact is there is this perception, and there is this amazing fantasy or



**Untitled**

1998

Construction paper, clear tape  
h. 86.5 cm,  $\varnothing$  5 cm

A form made by laminating consecutively larger then consecutively smaller circles cut from different colour construction paper sits atop a cone of coiled clear tape. The sculpture hangs from the ceiling by monofilament, 30.5 cm off the ground.

**whatever, someone constructing this theory, and it just makes incredible fiction or science fiction or non-fiction or whatever. It's so interesting because these realities are confused.**

**Cooper** So that's the poetic. I mean, that's where the poetic derives from?

Friedman **Yeah.**

**Cooper** Did the work you made a few years ago with space station imagery (*Space Station*, 1997, see page 131) begin introducing the poetic into your work?

Friedman **Yeah, the space station was like an outpost connecting the known and the unknown. It's something that, in a similar way to the microscope, extends our perception beyond the capabilities of our immediate senses. I think that work was an attempt at really trying to take these very disparate investigations and solidify or make autonomous each one, and then unite them and bring them together. You can't help but begin constructing narratives when that process happens – just like in a dream, when you're**

**bombarded with impressions, and your mind naturally constructs a narrative to link the impressions together.**

**Cooper** So there was a shift happening there?

**Friedman** I'm not trying to draw the viewer into a specific place, I'm drawing them into the constellation of ideas, which is probably why I made the spider sculpture (*Untitled*, 1997). I thought about the spider as this thing that spins a web. I see the spider connecting ideas with its web.

**Cooper** Insects keep crawling into your work (*laughter*).

**Friedman** The first insects I made were the fly sculptures (*Untitled*, 1995), which initially began with an incident where the artist Charles Long, who used my shit piece in a show he was curating called 'Critical Mass' (A & A Gallery, Yale University School of Art, New Haven, and tour, 1994–95), had to put a cup over the piece of shit because a fly was buzzing around it. He sent me a photograph of the cup over the shit and the fly on the pedestal. That sparked the fly pieces.

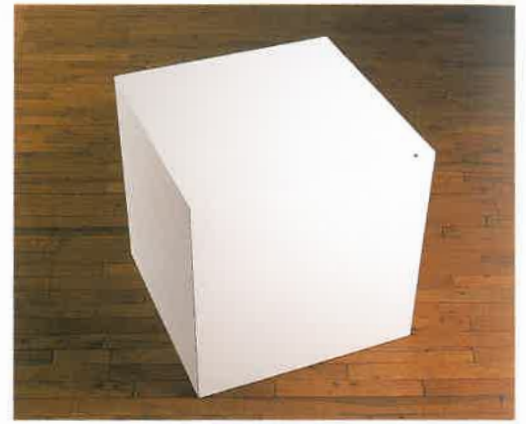
**Cooper** Would the dragonfly (*Untitled*, 1997, see page 64) be some kind of psychedelic mutation of the fly?

**Friedman** Yeah, exactly. The dragonfly represented a shift into thinking about fantasy.

**Untitled**  
1997  
Clay, hair, fishline, paint  
12.5 × 10 × 2 cm  
A handmade spider rests on the wall.







**Cooper** But this wasn't a radical shift for you, it was a natural progression?

**Friedman** **Right. When you think about something over and over again it just sort of vanishes. It diffuses into possibilities and loses its objectivity. I have this fascination with mapping things out, mapping out very complex systems. And being able in a way to map them in my head without being able to translate them, or not having the ability or the skills to explain them. I'm very torn by that, by that inability. And I think that somehow that's a part of my work, a big part of it.**

**Cooper** Are the materials you use a limitation?

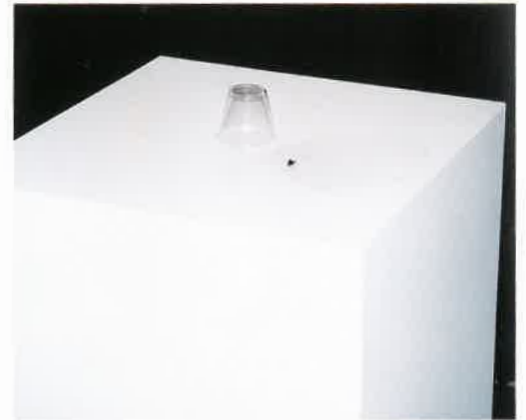
**Friedman** **I have the idea of wanting something to be explanatory, but once I begin to explain, it's not what it's about.**

**Cooper** So do you end up simulating the enigma that it has for you?

**Friedman** **Yeah. The explaining becomes the object, as opposed to the indicator.**

**Cooper** I wonder, do your pieces ever fail in process, or do they generally succeed once you've reached the point where you move from concept to construction?

**Friedman** **There are a lot of pieces I will begin but be unable to resolve. I'll either trash them because I just need to purge myself of them, or I'll put them**



opposite, top, left and right,

**Untitled**

1995

Plastic, hair, fuzz, Play-Doh, wire,  
paint, wood

61.5 x 61 x 61 cm

Collection, The Museum of Modern  
Art, New York

A handmade fly rests on the edge  
of a cube.

opposite, bottom, **Untitled**

(protected from fly by plastic cup)

1992

Faeces on pedestal

Pedestal, 51 x 51 x 51 cm; faeces,  
∅ 0.5 mm

A sphere one-half millimetre in  
diameter of the artist's faeces  
rests precisely centred atop the  
cubed pedestal.

Installation, 'Critical Mass', Dallas  
Artists Research and Exhibition,  
McKinney Avenue Contemporary,  
Dallas, 1995

**Untitled**

1995

Gelatin pill capsule, Play-Doh

1.9 x 0.6 x 0.6 cm

A gelatin pill capsule filled with  
tiny spheres of Play-Doh.

aside, and come back to them at some other point. I started the toothpick sculpture (*Untitled*, 1995, see page 81) but had to put it aside for a couple of years. I couldn't resolve for myself a departure from the clear limits my work was exploring. It wasn't until I made the pill capsule (*Untitled*, 1995) that I could come back to it. The pill allowed me to move from the ideas of containment to invention. I saw the toothpick sculpture as a response to consuming the pill containing Play-Doh as its medicine.

**Cooper** Do you ever look back on pieces you've shown and think, 'Oh, this is a failure'? Or are there pieces you think have been particularly successful? Do you make differentiations like that?

**Friedman** **Not really. Each piece for me becomes essential to the progression of my investigation.**

**Cooper** Have you ever gotten so lost that you've looked back on your older work to remember who you are as an artist?

**Friedman** **Well, a form that has been recurring in my work is a motif representing diffusion, where there's a dense centre and then it diffuses out, almost like the Big Bang in a way. Even the things that I do now incorporate the idea of clarity and specificity that I was striving for in the beginning. But there are shifts. My thinking started to shift a little around 1995 when I had a**





show at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in the Project Space ('Projects 50: Tom Friedman', 1995). I became interested in information and the effects of an inundation of information. As the velocity that information is presented increases, one's ability to process that information shuts down, and just the texture of the information is perceived. I started to work on a piece sparked by these ideas surrounding this flood of information and how it leads to the organization of information into categories. I did this piece where on a piece of paper 36 by 36 inches (91.5 × 91.5 cm), I wrote all the words in a dictionary (*Everything*, 1992–95). The words were not written in order; I wanted them to be scattered throughout the paper as a way of homogenizing the language. The paper was presented on the floor, and it looked from a distance like a textured blue paper. I was interested in how the information about the piece unfolded. How it began as a seemingly inconspicuous textured paper, the texture becomes words, the words represent a total system, the fullness and the emptiness.

**Cooper** So the creating and unfolding are in perfect balance or mirrored?

Friedman **Right.**



**Cooper** Like a film being run forwards then backwards? Two processes that are identical except for their order?

**Friedman** It's more my thought process trying to gain an understanding and control of that type of unfolding. Like when you're presented with something unfamiliar you ask yourself a series of basic questions: What is it? Where did it come from? Why is it here? I wanted these objects to begin with this direct line of questions.

**Cooper** While making the piece, is the viewer your fantasy?

**Friedman** I developed a somewhat split personality where I could be the artist and also the viewer, in a way. And then the viewer would be in a sense my idea of the ideal viewer.

**Cooper** In other words, you?

**Friedman** Right, (laughter) I guess my ideal viewer has to be me.

**Cooper** What other works were in that MoMA show?

**Friedman** There was a piece titled *Loop* (1993–95) which was made with spaghetti. I used a one-pound (435g) box of spaghetti. I cooked the spaghetti and then let the noodles dry into curls. Then I connected each piece end to end making this meandering configuration until the end connected back to the beginning. At this point I started to think about the idea of complexity, which seemed to be a logical jump from thinking about simplicity. The *Loop* piece, which I somehow saw as a diagram, was a pun on the noodle being the brain, and was directing one through a perpetual convoluted line of thought.

*opposite, Everything*

1992–95

Pen on paper

91.5 × 91.5 cm

All the words in the English language written on a large sheet of paper which sits on the floor.

*right, Loop*

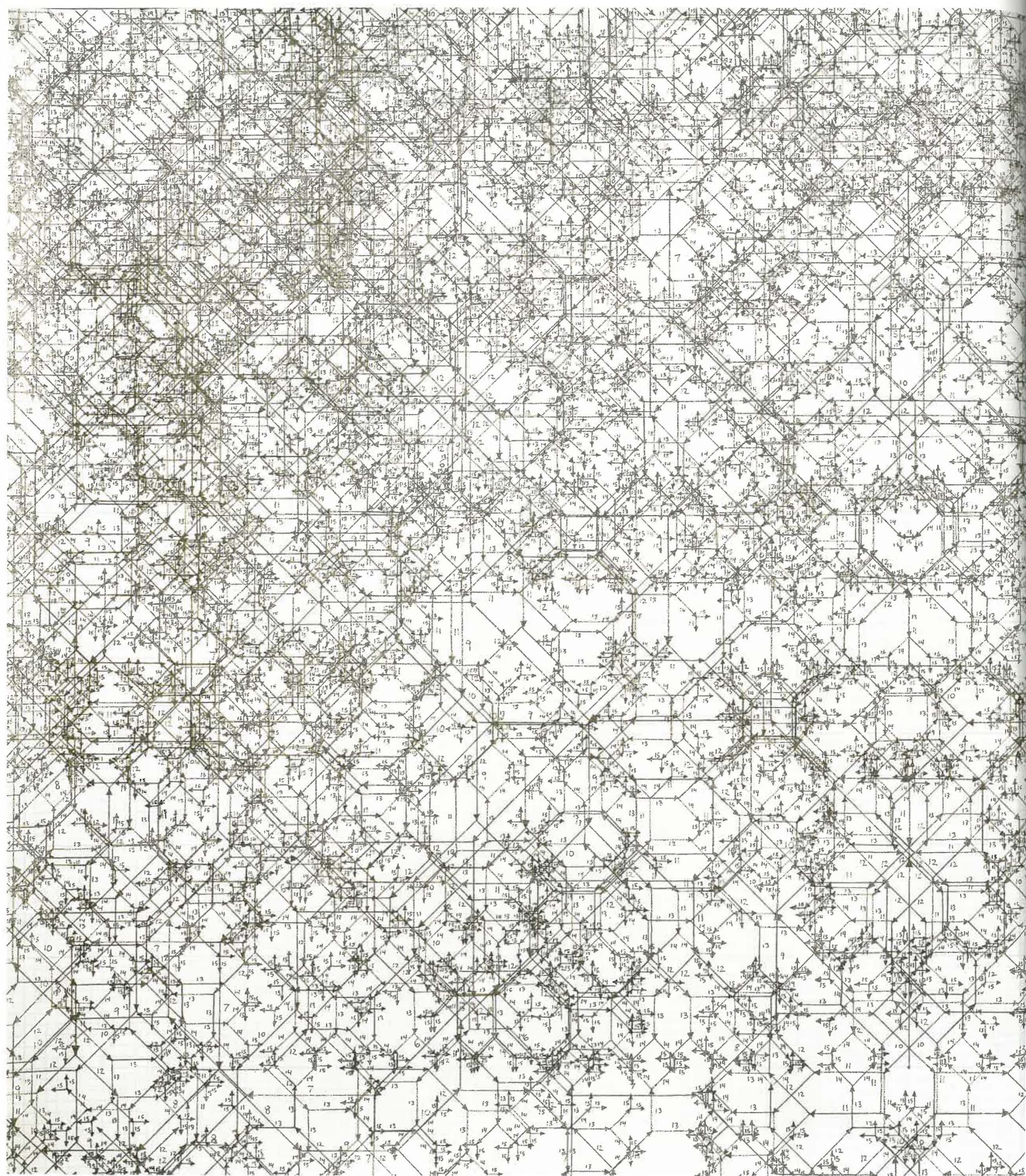
1993–95

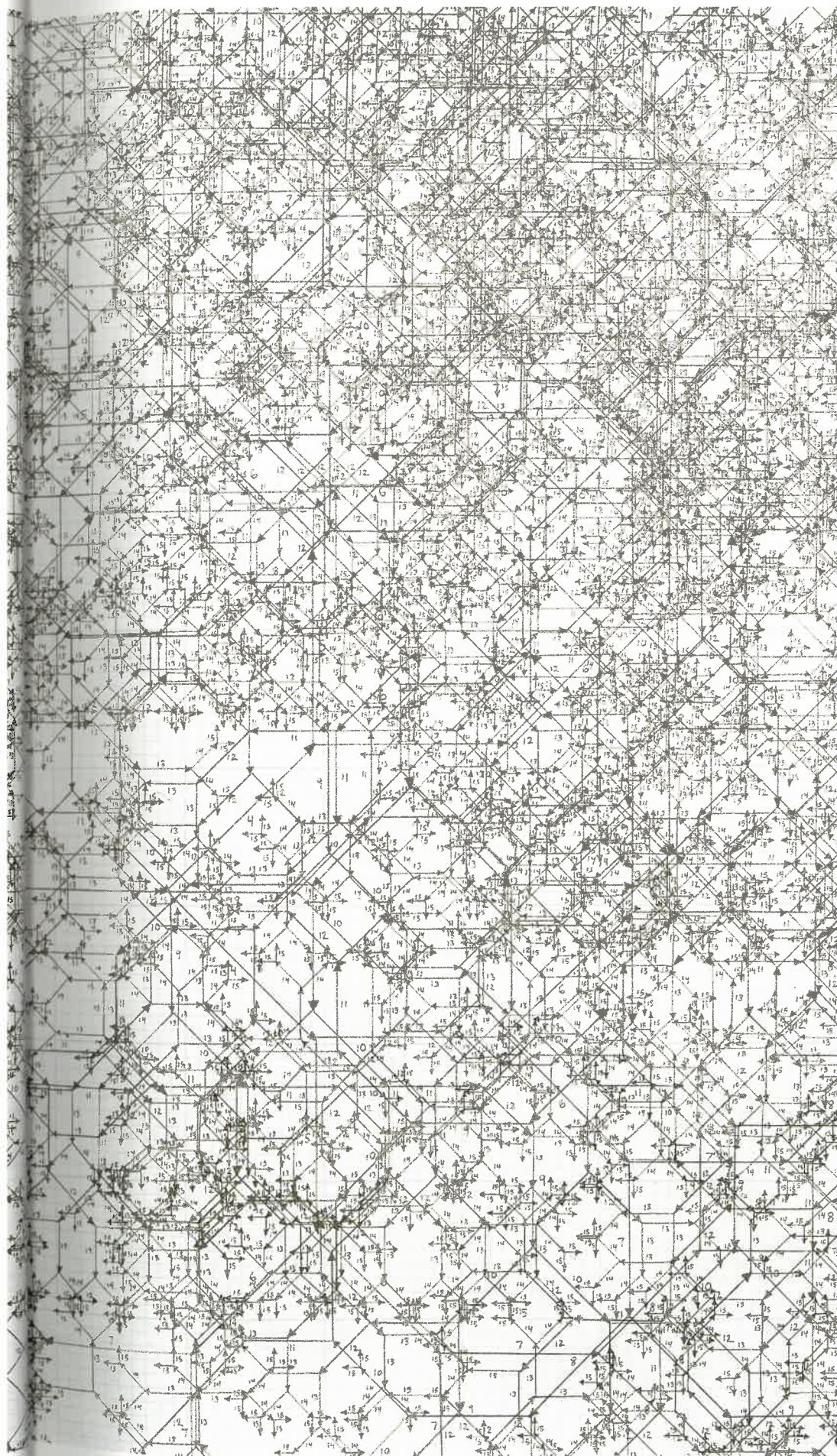
Spaghetti

∅ 30.5 cm

All the pieces of spaghetti from a 435g box were cooked, dried and then connected end-to-end. The first piece connects to the last to form a continuous loop.







**Untitled**

1995

Pencil on graph paper

28 × 43 cm

A line begins from a point at the lower centre of the paper. The end of this line generates two lines at 45° angles. The ends of these two lines generate two more lines each, also at 45° angles, and so on, up to the fifteenth generation. Each generation of lines is 0.3 cm shorter than the previous generation, and each line is numbered as to its generation.



**Untitled**  
1995  
Bubble gum  
Dimensions variable  
A single piece of chewed bubble gum is stuck to the ceiling, stretched and stuck to the floor.

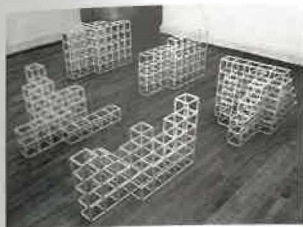
**Cooper** Was that the shift?

**Friedman** Yeah. In a way the complexity forced me to think more about the diagram: things that organize information and orient people. I started to use a diagram with every body of work that described my thinking at the time. For my next body of work, which was at the Feature exhibition in 1996, I did this drawing on graph paper where I started with a point, and there was a vector from that point (*Untitled*, 1995). And then that vector would divide at right angles, and it would be slightly shorter in length than the previous one. It just kept dividing and dividing until it turned in on itself, confusing this basic process. For me that represented a move from the simple to the complex. I think at this point I started to work on each piece within a body of work simultaneously. I wouldn't finish a piece and then move to the next piece. It was almost as if the whole body of work was one piece.

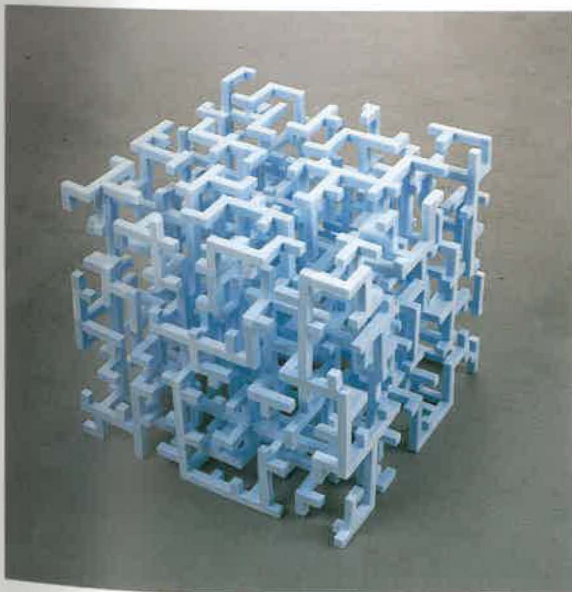
**Cooper** They were more interdependent than before?

**Friedman** They related to each other in different ways, ranging from a conceptual relationship to purely a formal relationship. I started to investigate the relationship between ideas that moved apart from each other. I was interested in their increasingly tenuous relationship. There's a word-game you can play where one person mentions two distinctly different words and the other person tries to find a third word that connects the two words. It became almost like that kind of play. I was involved in so many seemingly divergent investigations that I also saw as all part of the same constellation of ideas. I was discovering the elements throughout that constellation of ideas, and finding out how they related or came together as a total thing. The idea of pulling things apart, further and further, was interesting. I did this piece where I chewed a piece of bubble gum, stuck it to the ceiling, then stretched it and stuck it to the floor (*Untitled*, 1995). I used stretching a piece of bubble gum as an analogy for this idea: as you stretch the gum the

*opposite*, **Untitled**  
2000  
Polystyrene insulation  
40.5 × 40.5 × 40.5 cm  
A network made with 0.6 cm sections of hard insulation connected at right angles.



**Sol LeWitt**  
 Five Modular Structures  
 (Sequential Permutations on the  
 Number Five)  
 1972  
 Painted wood  
 5 parts, dimensions variable



**connecting thread becomes thinner and thinner. I reached a point where the idea of fantasy started to filter in, because when the connection between things becomes so slight, things are not read as a cohesive whole, which is kind of how my work has now evolved.**

**Cooper** This might seem like a strange segue, but I wonder about your relationship, if any, to the idea of the 'outsider artist'.

**Friedman** I've thought about that, and in fact this recent body of work sort of began with that in a way. I was thinking about the outsider artist as a way of not having to deal with content in the same way; there is this other type of aesthetic that re-situates how one looks at something, not looking from the standpoint of participating, or fulfilling a type of dialogue, but as the personal, bare bones essentials of making something out of nothing.

**Cooper** I mean outsider art has its own problems, there's a condescension towards it. There's a perception of outsider art as a manifestation of insanity that merely resembles art. But, on the other hand, critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote a review of one of your shows where he said something like, 'Tom Friedman would be nowhere without the Minimalism that his work kicks against'. I never think of you as working from Minimalism particularly. But, because you're a 'contemporary artist', the assumption is immediately made that your work self-consciously references art history.

**Friedman** I do rely on Minimalism in the same way I rely on the whole art context.

**Cooper** But, if you were an outsider artist, no one would ever say, 'This must be viewed in light of Minimalism'. If you were an outsider artist, no one would refer to your work as obsessive; that would be a given. If there's a chorus in the collected writings on your work, it's the word 'obsessive'.

**Friedman** Right. But I think most artists obsess over their work. 'Obsessive' is a convenient word to describe one aspect of my work, but it doesn't take into account the reasons behind the acts that are characterized as obsessive, so it's a failed approach.

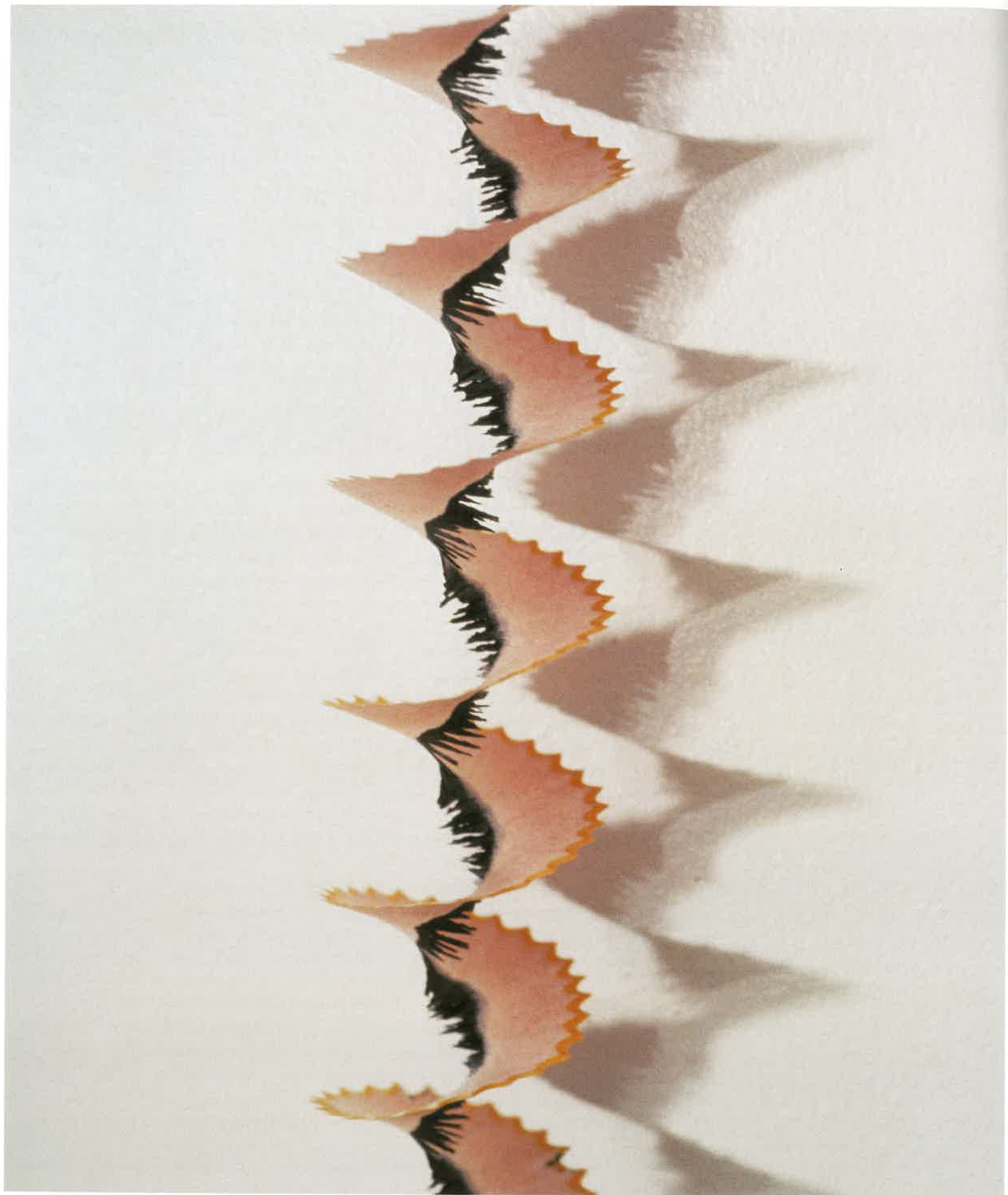
**Cooper** Do you feel hemmed in at all by the reality that your work will always be seen either in galleries or museums?

**Friedman** No, I really like that context. I think about the ideal viewer, and the ideal viewing situation. The ideal viewing situation is this place that demands that you slow down experience, and bring all of who you are to the experience. I know that, in reality, the gallery and museum don't have that, but I still make work for those ideals. I like keeping that illusion with me.

**Cooper** What about when your work moves from the gallery into a collector's home?

**Friedman** I think that after I make it and it goes into the gallery it's in its sort of original context within a body of work. Then it's taken out and it becomes





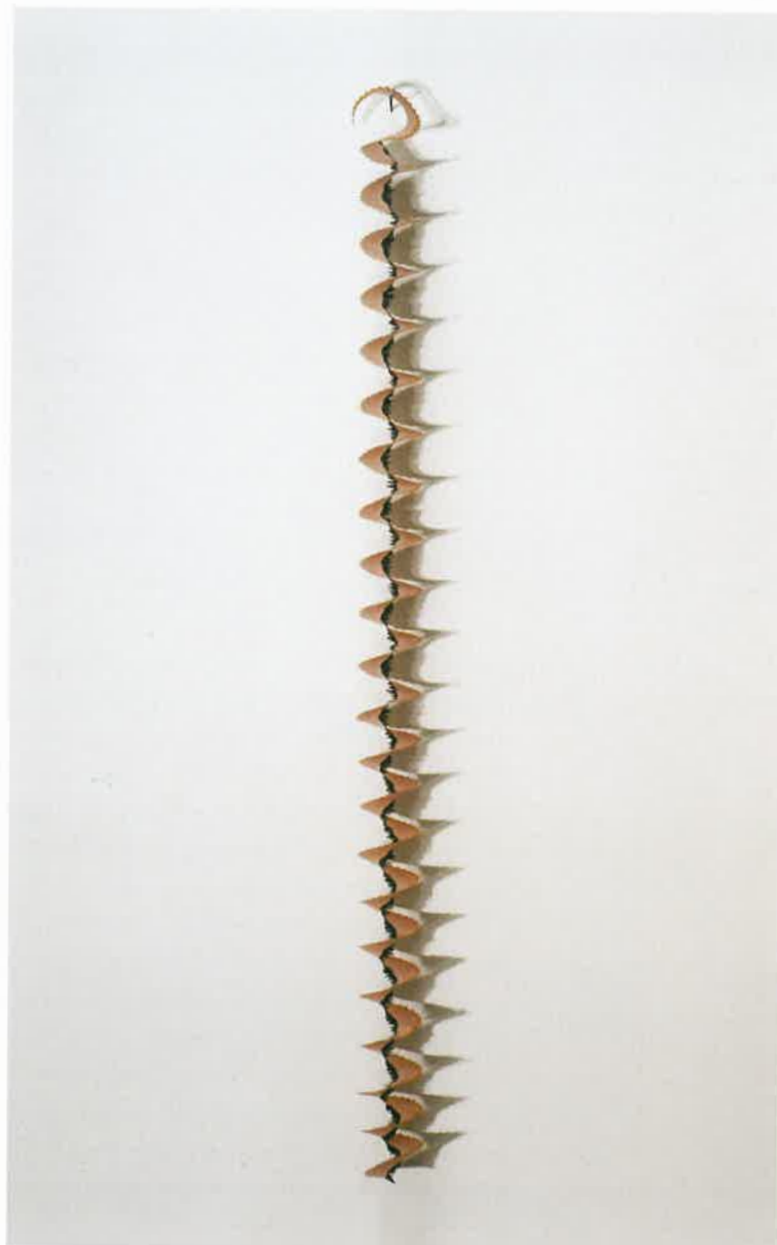
**Untitled**

1992

Pencil shaving

56 × 4 × 4 cm

A pencil was completely shaved by a pencil sharpener into one long, continuous spiral.



historical, more of an artefact, as opposed to the same conveyor of meaning it was originally. I'm willing to accept that type of conceptual, ephemeral quality; that seems to fit in with my work. I read something about how artist Charles Ray remade some pieces for his retrospective because they had shown age, and he felt their age added a history that got in the way of their immediacy and their presence.

**Cooper** Do you feel the opposite way?

**Friedman** Well, I think I'm just more accepting of the inevitable. I have to be. But I am going to remake some pieces that have shown their age and stuff for my survey show organized by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (Winston-Salem, 2000–02). It's not a rigid thing for me.

**Cooper** When you remake a piece, do you simulate the process through which you originally made it?

Friedman **Usually, for the pieces that I remake, the process is very direct. I mean there's really no way of deviating from that process. The process is the process, like putting a pencil in a pencil sharpener.**

**1,000 Hours of Staring**

1992–97

Paper

82.5 × 82.5 cm

A piece of paper the artist has stared at for one thousand hours.

**Cooper** So you're not going to stare at another piece of paper for a thousand hours (*1,000 Hours of Staring*, 1992–97)?

Friedman **No, you can do that! (laughter) One thing I'm really consumed with is the question of why? What is the purpose of art? How does it serve? What does it do? I can kind of see it as this thing that is not directly necessary – you know, why not spend my time helping people more directly? Why am I spending my time isolated, thinking about and making these things? It's something that keeps me in check in a way: the idea of doing something important or useless.**

**Cooper** Ultimately, you believe it's important.

Friedman **I don't know. I think in terms of ideals. If I were to think of what the ideal art would be, that would be art that gives viewers an experience that they take with them and that causes them this incredible revelation which they, as enlightened people, turn towards society. They would do these amazing things that penetrate other people and who then all come together and we live in harmony, and there's peace, and we all are transcendent individuals. It sounds like a comedy. It sort of comes down to something very personal, and that's interesting in terms of any philosophy or art or anything that seems to transcend the individual sitting down thinking about these things where that sort of essential nature comes into play. Like we'll do something, and then that thing we do and the decisions that we make are sparked by our history and stuff. A lot of the decisions that are made now within the social landscape are very business-oriented and business-driven, for example, they are the result of marketing research. What's the end to this process? It seems to be somehow an arbitrary end: that people will fulfil their lives with the product. And then the owners of the company, and the people involved in the company, will have more money, so that they can have the things that make them feel better.**

**Cooper** Which has everything to do with you, but nothing to do with your work.

Friedman **You're accepting the enjoyment of it, the personal enjoyment of it, rather than seeing the consequences of being seduced by that enjoyment.**

**Cooper** Lastly, has your considerable success as a young artist impacted your work in a positive or negative way? Or does it matter at all?

Friedman **I'm happy that my work can have this type of reaction in people, but it seems to make things more difficult. I'm attempting to create these specific experiences and, as I do more work, there is more and more information and history to look through, that filters one's experience of these objects, like a growing fog.**

