

SUSPENDED, LIGHT

Alexander Fischer & Juan Uslé

Swiss Institute New York

SUSPENDED, LIGHT

Alexander Fischer - Juan Uslé

by Martin Kunz

This exhibition at the Swiss Institute in New York juxtaposes the work of two artists, Alexander Fischer, a sculptor, and Juan Uslé, a painter, whose different backgrounds and their use of media offer some provocative contrasts.

Alexander Fischer (b. 1957, Dagmersellen, Switzerland) grew up in Lucerne and lived in Zurich before moving to New York in 1989. He is a sculptor, a designer and sometime-manufacturer of furniture. During my tenure as director of the Lucerne Museum of Fine Arts, I arranged exhibitions of Fischer's early furniture designs in 1986 and his drawings and objects in 1987.

In curating *Suspended, Light*, the first exhibition of Fischer's work in New York, I chose to focus exclusively on his recent sculpture. This second group of sculptures created in New York were specifically designed for this exhibition space and as a counterpart to Juan Uslé's paintings. Incidentally, the two artists first met during the preparations for this project.

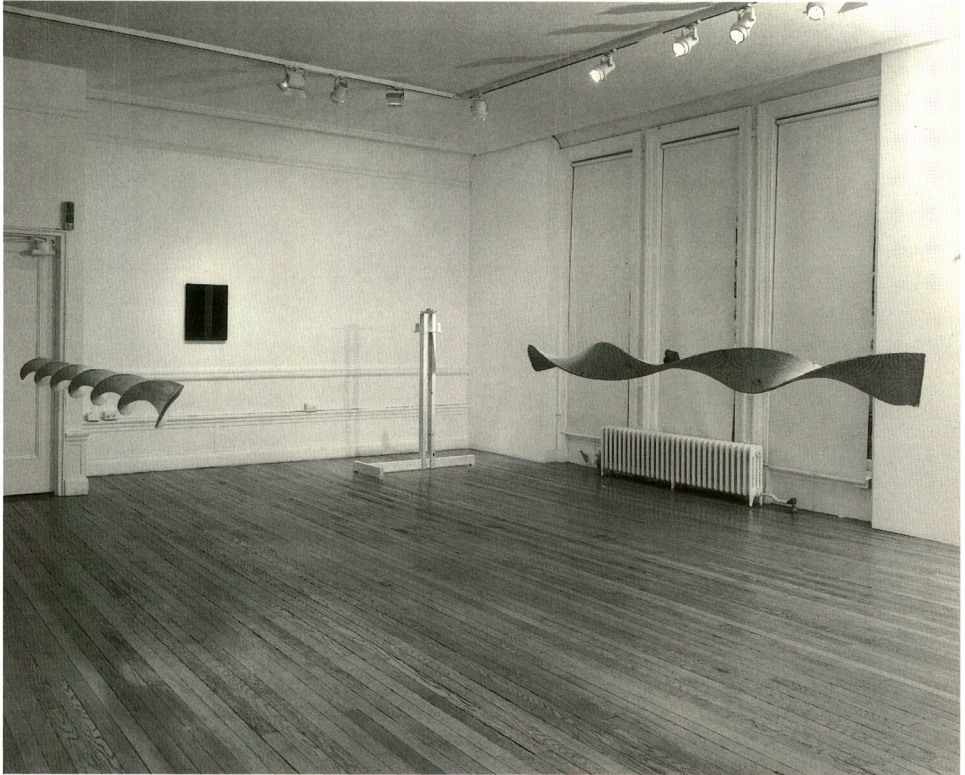
Juan Uslé (b. 1954, Santander, Spain) first gained recognition as a painter in Spain. Since 1987, he has been living primarily in New York, while still maintaining contact with the Spanish contemporary art scene.

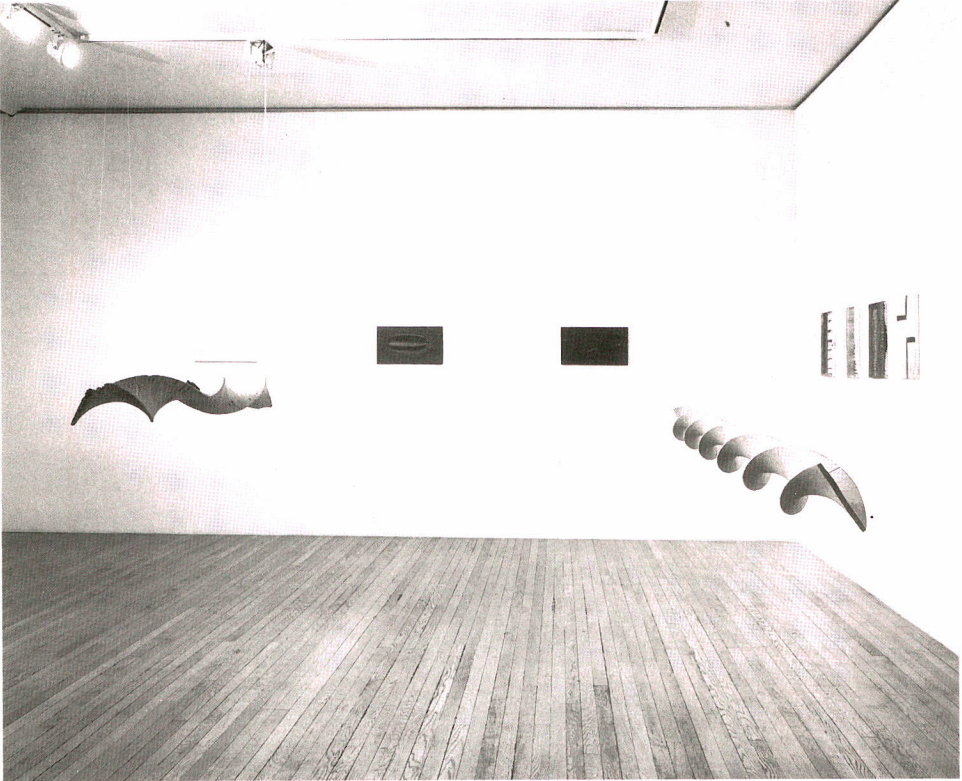
Although Uslé has a slight biographical head start over Fischer, at least as far as their work in this city is concerned, the fact that both artists decided to leave their homelands to live and work in New York is a common bond that makes for

interesting comparisons. Uslé, the elder of the two, has already shown in New York group exhibitions that include *Painting Alone* at the Pace Gallery and *Inconsolable: An Exhibition about Painting* at the Louver Gallery in 1990. In addition, two monographs on his work have been published in Spain. While this does not constitute a long, distinguished international career, it certainly is an indication of Spain's commitment to fostering new talent. Uslé's recognition in his own country is not only due to public grants and endowments but also to a receptive art market and open-minded collectors who support young emerging artists in their country.

Also, the Swiss government must be credited for their patronage, which has made possible this binational exhibition at the Swiss Institute in New York.

What was the impetus behind joining these two seemingly divergent artists in one show? Having previously exhibited Fischer's work over the years, I did not want to present his objects solely in their own context. What I had in mind was to combine his work with that of a younger painter, preferably of the same generation. An old friend who knows and appreciates Fischer's sculpture, the artist Joel Fisher, called my attention to Uslé's paintings. Indeed, I found that the two artists have a similar approach in their use of materials: Uslé, working with paint, and Fischer, working with wood, both strive to negate their respective mediums. Herein, I will examine how this point relates to each artist's work.





The Paintings of Juan Uslé

Uslé's paintings spontaneously struck me for their "presence of the immaterial." This may sound contradictory: color as matter, certainly a crucial element in the work, is therefore present, yet I sense a process of reduction. Even when thin films of paint are applied in numerous layers, they never seem quite concrete. They appear as traces of the process, as well as being the painting's subject. At first, these paintings can be read as abstract, then they are gradually revealed as transformations of sensory perceptions, like landscapes that light dissolves to near-nothingness. Many critics, particularly Dan Cameron, Kevin Power and Klaus Ottmann, have rightly stressed the influence of the romantic tradition in Uslé's imagery, which is evident in his fascination with light as a reality-dissolving, poetic transformer of nature. Uslé is admittedly intrigued by Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, especially *Monk by the Sea*, but I find he has a stronger affinity with J.M.W. Turner's "light-landscapes," most notably his seascapes. By no means a literal reflection, Uslé's paintings, like Turner's, attempt to dissolve nature — and hence color as the medium of the image — through the use of light.

In his essay "Moving in a Sublime Submarine," Kevin Power shows how the process of dissolution inside the barely discernable naturalism of Uslé's work is in the tradition of North European Romanticism. Uslé accepts this with reservation in that he does not have a static relationship to the historical movement of Romanticism. For him, all boundaries are fluid and current experiences are a critical part of his artmaking. Power also notes that the vertical

divisions and strokes in Uslé's paintings directly relate to Barnett Newman and continue the modern tradition of American abstract painting. In assimilating Newman's work, Uslé pays homage to an artist who dealt with romantic mysticism in his writing (for example, in "The Sublime is Now") and his painting. Yet Uslé's work displays nothing of the preciousness that such conscious, essentially presumptuous references often connote. It is the lack of self-consciousness that distinguishes Uslé's paintings from other work that uses historical references in order to transgress the traditional art context. Uslé's unaffected, natural approach is rather uncommon in a time when artists tend to use irony and cynicism in their "approbations" or appropriations. Uslé, in contrast, seeks closeness through respect for his artistic models, rather than distance through irony.

For further commentary on the spiritual basis of Uslé's work, I refer the reader to the critics mentioned above. Instead, let me express my amazement at Uslé's ability to effectively tread on the beaten paths of painting. How has Uslé succeeded in stepping out of the shadow of his great predecessors in the romantic tradition? How has he accomplished this in a time when painting seems to have exhausted all subjective, expressive patterns?

Unlike Barnett Newman, Uslé has not tried to create a structure that waives any mimetic, representational function. When he uses spatial structures, he hides them; when he employs visual experience and imagination, he reduces them to minimal traces. This is his secret recipe: the traces are not intended as a reduction to absolute nothingness or pure abstraction, but rather as a reduction

to a minimal residue of memory, paint, space and structure. It is a balancing act that requires a great deal of talent and painterly skill, yet it never aspires to be painting for painting's sake or a conspicuous expression of an ego — the ego, too, is present only in faint traces. Uslé's unique approach relieves him of any fears or doubts about advancing on the well-trodden paths of painting. His contribution to *Suspended, Light* is not only "light"— the light and lightness of transcended matter in Uslé's work also "suspends" the painting as a material object.

Alexander Fischer's Suspended Sculptures

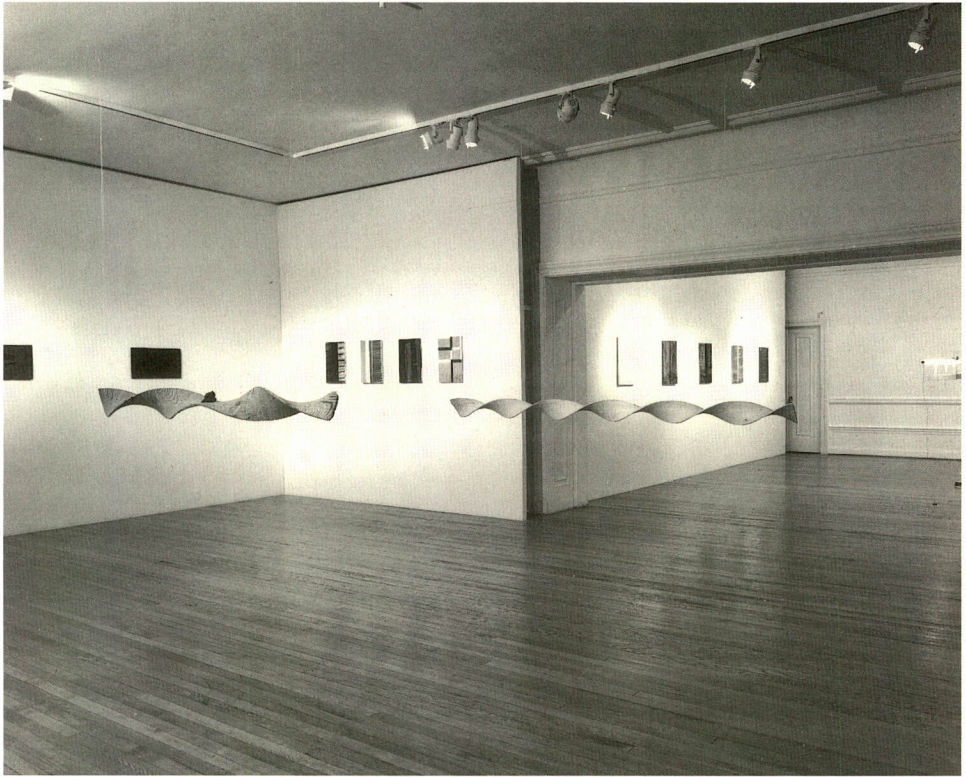
From his first pieces, Fischer has tried to radically free the presentation of sculpture from its traditional "pedestal." While many of his pieces are suspended freely in space, Fischer has also entirely integrated the pedestal into the sculpture itself by using "long legs" or other slender supporting elements that make the object appear weightless, as if suspended in midair.

This external technique to overcome the inherent gravity of sculpture is achieved through design that approaches the aerodynamic. Fischer's goal is not merely to create hovering objects — in that case he may as well make gas-filled balloons — but to transcend a given material weight and heaviness. He chooses heavy materials that are stripped down to a minimal point in the course of the design process. Since this inherent contradiction cannot be absolutely resolved, Fischer uses the little trick of hanging the objects from the ceiling or constructing a

delicate pedestal as a discreet hint at the idealistic fiction reflected in his stated spiritual goal: “The liberation from matter; the harmony of consciousness and body. I attempt to achieve this harmony in my sculpture— consciousness is the idea of the sculptures; the body is the matter.”

For *Suspended, Light*, Fischer has chosen a new form, the wooden helix, which acts as a foundation for found stones. “The helix is built according to the ‘idea’ of an individual stone (i.e., its substance, vibrations, sound, etc.),” Fischer states. Using coarse tools such as a chain saw, the helixes are cut out of heavy wooden beams with great precision. The beams are stripped into cylindrical shapes and then carved into helixes that wind upward in pure or broken, level or sloped coils. At first sight, the seamless construction of the helixes hides the fact that they were painstakingly carved out of wooden blocks. They appear to be made from a single piece of wood. But the essential element of Fischer’s treatment of the material is the stripping down process where nothing remains except a minimal but precisely defined point that is statically balanced and self-supporting.

Fischer’s placement of the stones on the coils, from which he then derives the shape or “vibration” of each helix, results in a paradoxical situation: “The stones indicate the gravity on a gravity-free form...they also point to the human condition. The stone is a symbol for humankind, the helix a symbol for the course of life...As spirit is tied to matter, so too is man in a paradoxical situation.”





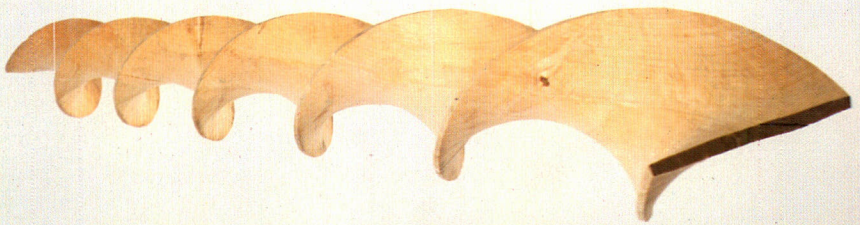
To experience these suspended objects, one must circle them not only visually but also physically. By following the vertical axis of the helix, the viewer loses his fixed point of view, his consciousness of up and down, while the precariously balanced stones provide a grounding point. With most of Fischer's work, suspension is a decisive factor—the material itself, which the artist makes us believe is hovering in the air, generates a tension between physical gravity and the imagination.

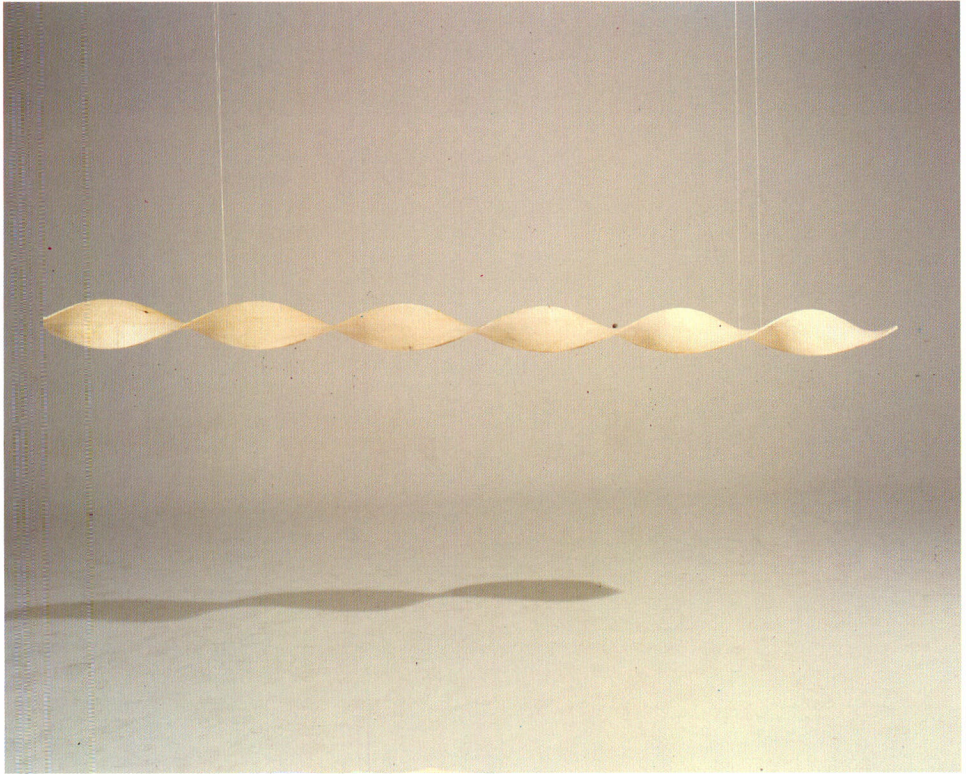
The Juxtaposition of Complements: Painting and Sculpture

As we have seen, the transformation of matter into light or weightlessness plays a central part in the work of both Uslé and Fischer. In sculpture, it is essential that the viewer walk around the object; in painting, the spatial interplay of different planes takes place on a two-dimensional surface, where a static position for the viewer is generally considered ideal. But Uslé's paintings led me to redefine my physical position in order to trace their varying structures from up close as well as from a distance, laterally as well as frontally. The optical illusions and the interplay of planes in his work are only revealed when viewed from different perspectives. The overpainted and underpainted layers of planes can only be fully perceived if one approaches the work from a variety of angles and foci. Unexpectedly, we find ourselves in the same active role when confronting Uslé's painting as we do in Fischer's sculpture: we experience both works physically as well as perceptually.

This exhibition, which confronts the viewer with a small number of paintings by Uslé with four sculptures by Fischer confirms this experience, if only unconsciously. Circling around and between the paintings and objects, the viewer can perceive these works in dynamic unison.

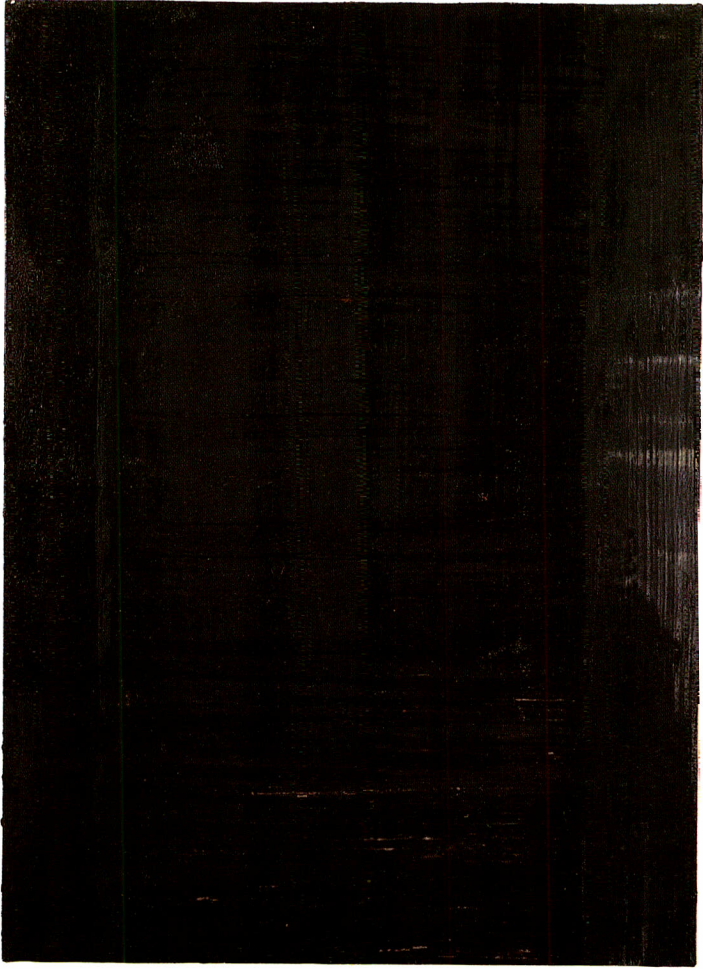
This catalogue is an attempt to translate my experiences working with these two artists into book form. To this end, the sculptures were photographed from different, carefully chosen angles and detail shots were taken of both the sculptures and the paintings. The details of the paintings in the catalogue are approximately to scale. The sequence of the illustrations has been expressly designed to lead the reader from work to work, alternating between painting and sculpture. In this way, I have tried to transform the spatial experience of the exhibition itself into the linear experience of reading a book. If successful, the reader should come away with a more authentic perception of the work than the usual catalogue format of one reproduction per work can provide. Ideally, this would render any further interpretation superfluous, so that this introduction itself may ultimately be as secondary as the thin threads from which Fischer's sculptures are suspended.

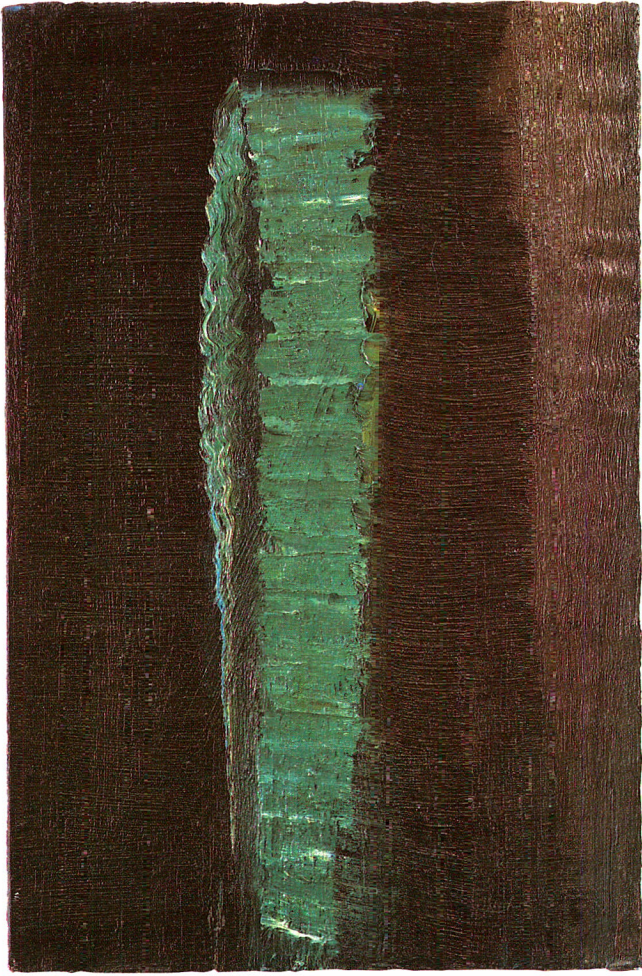


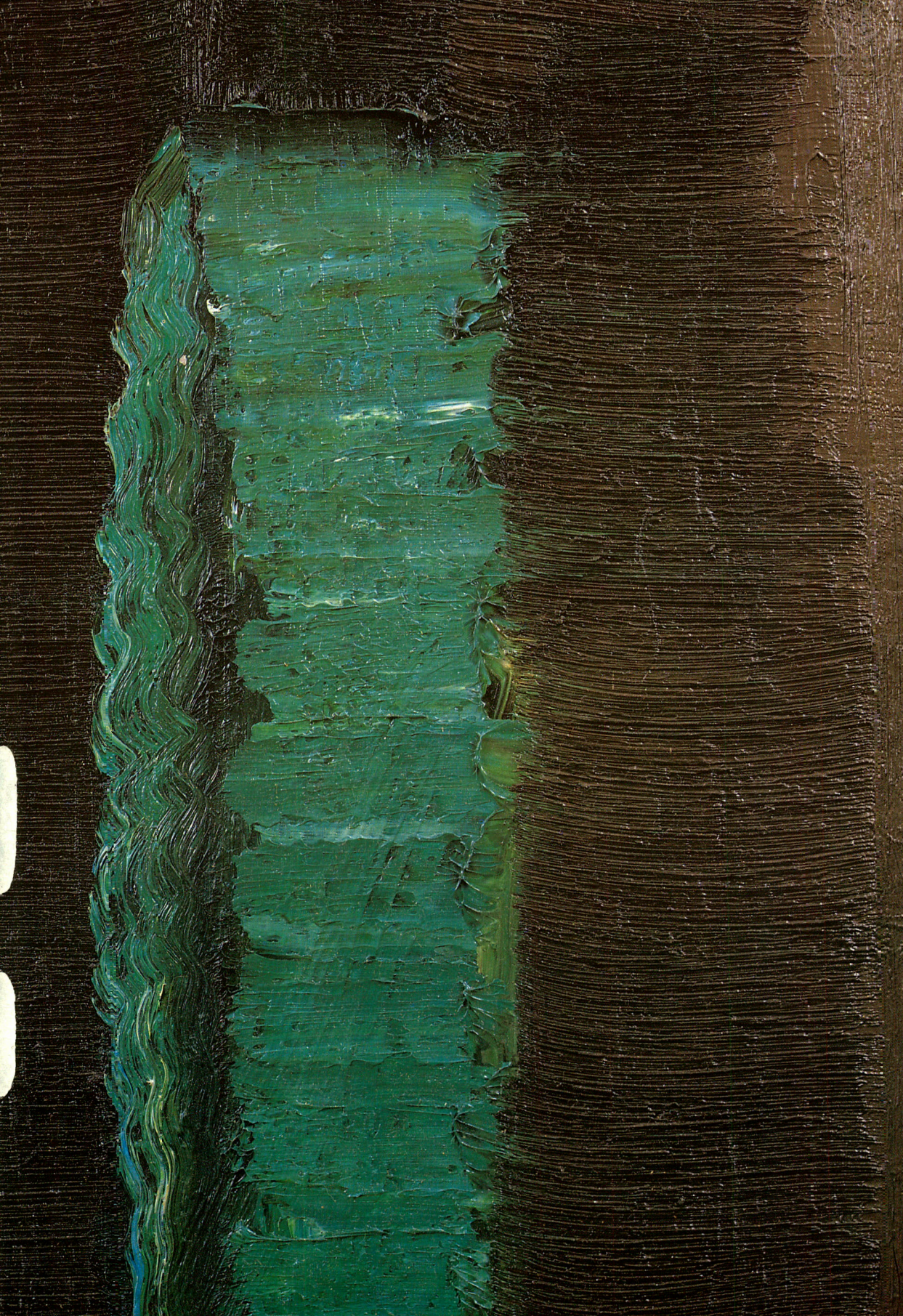


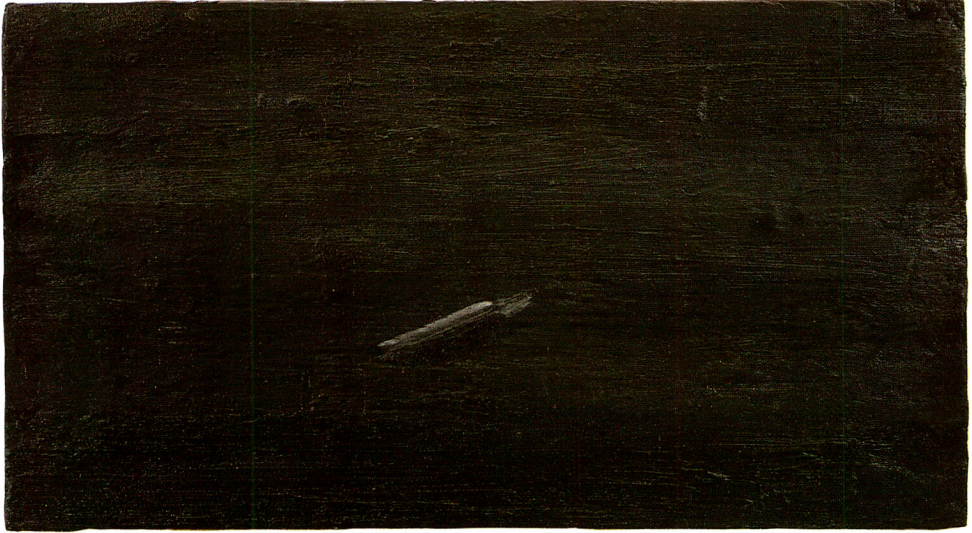




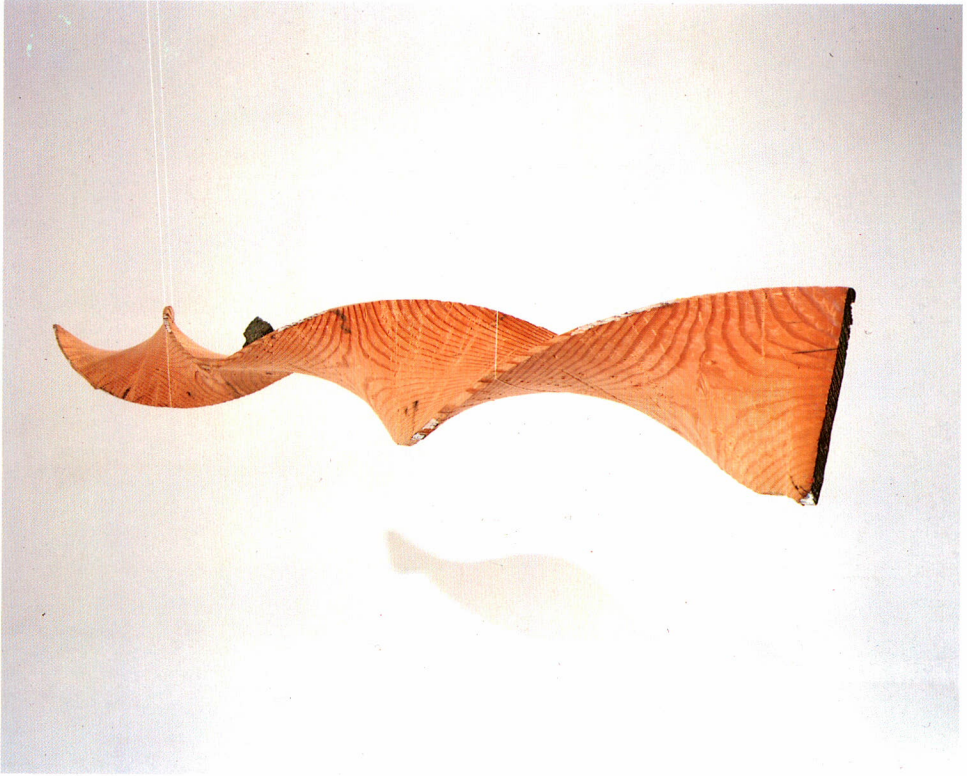


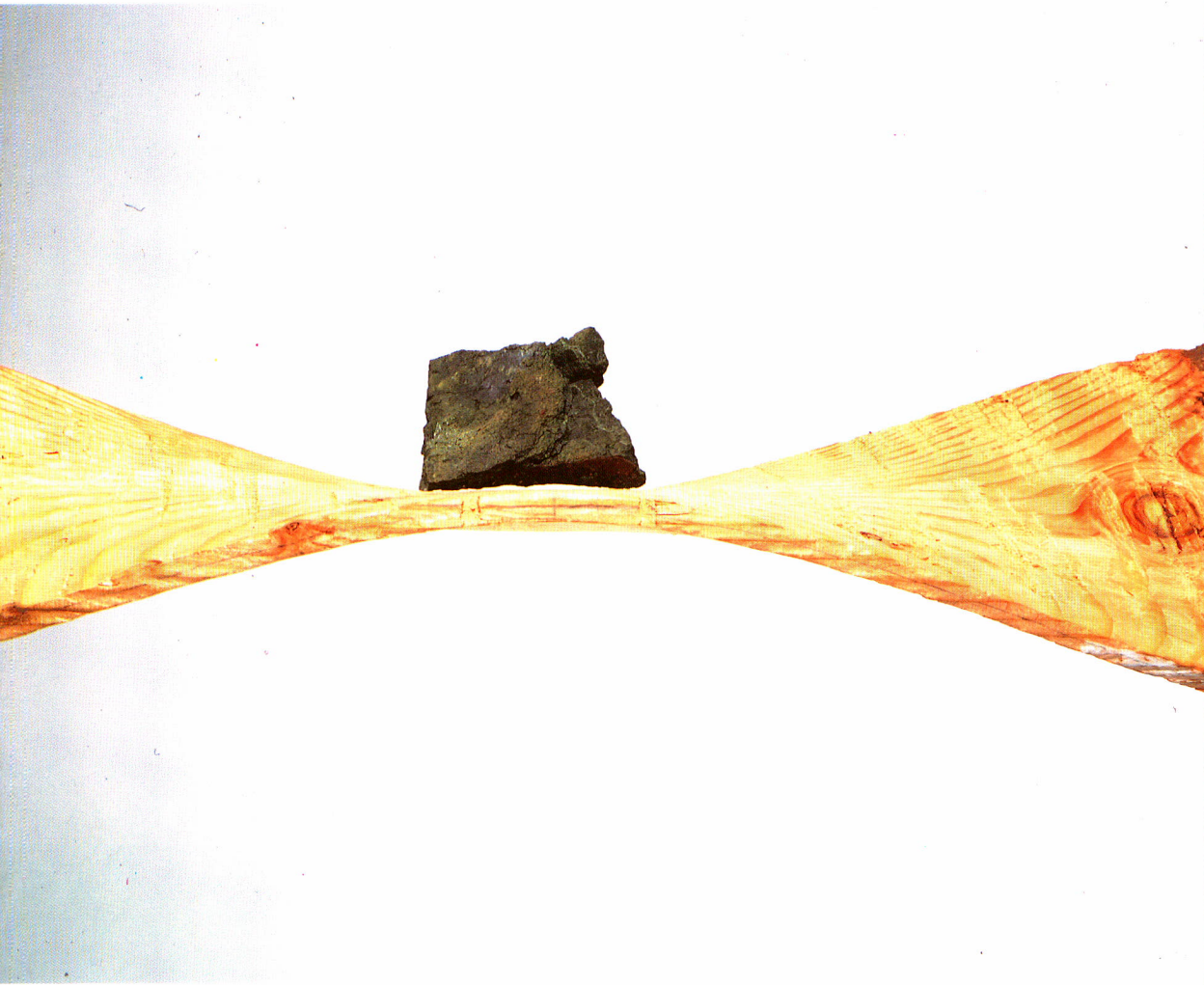


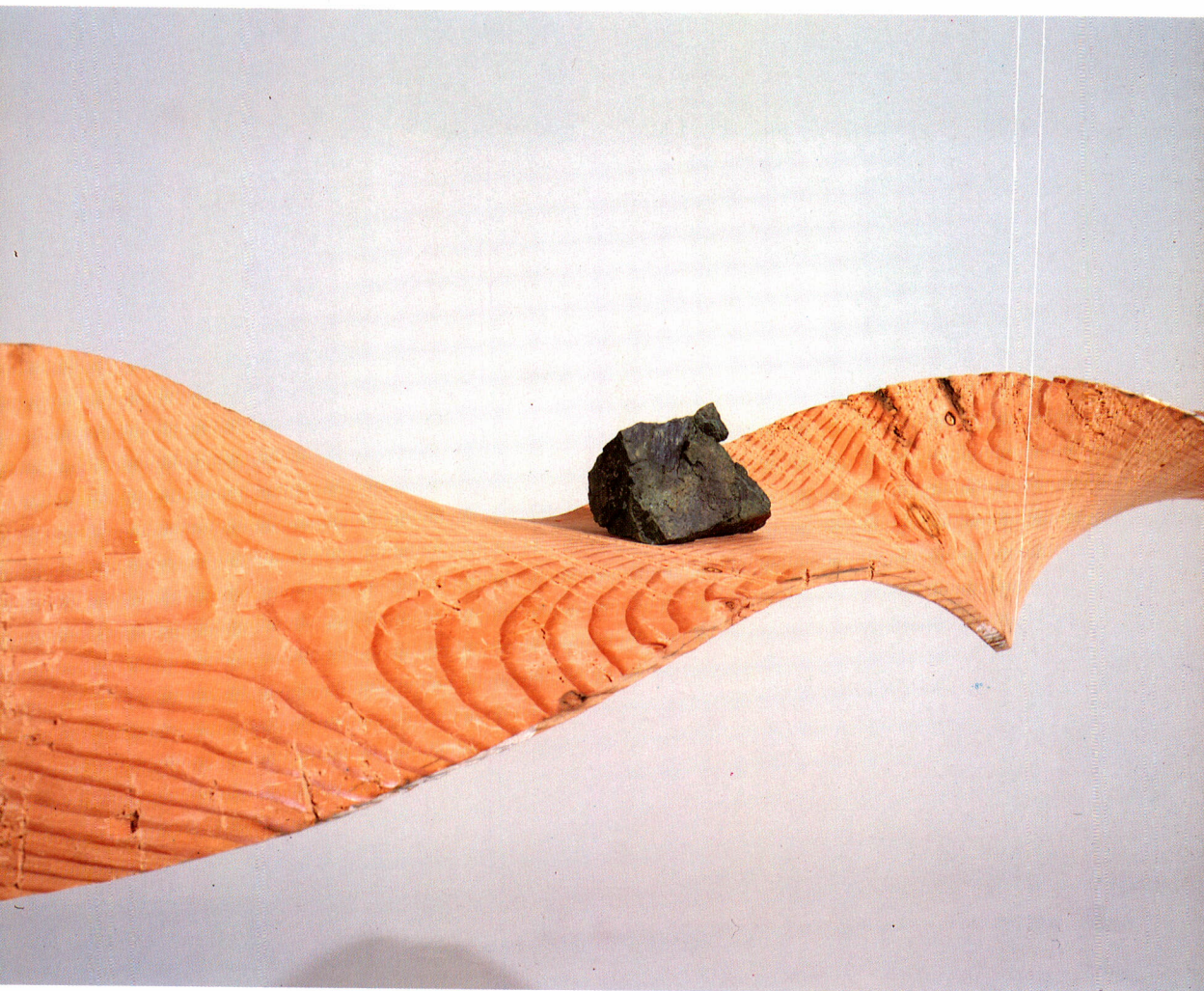


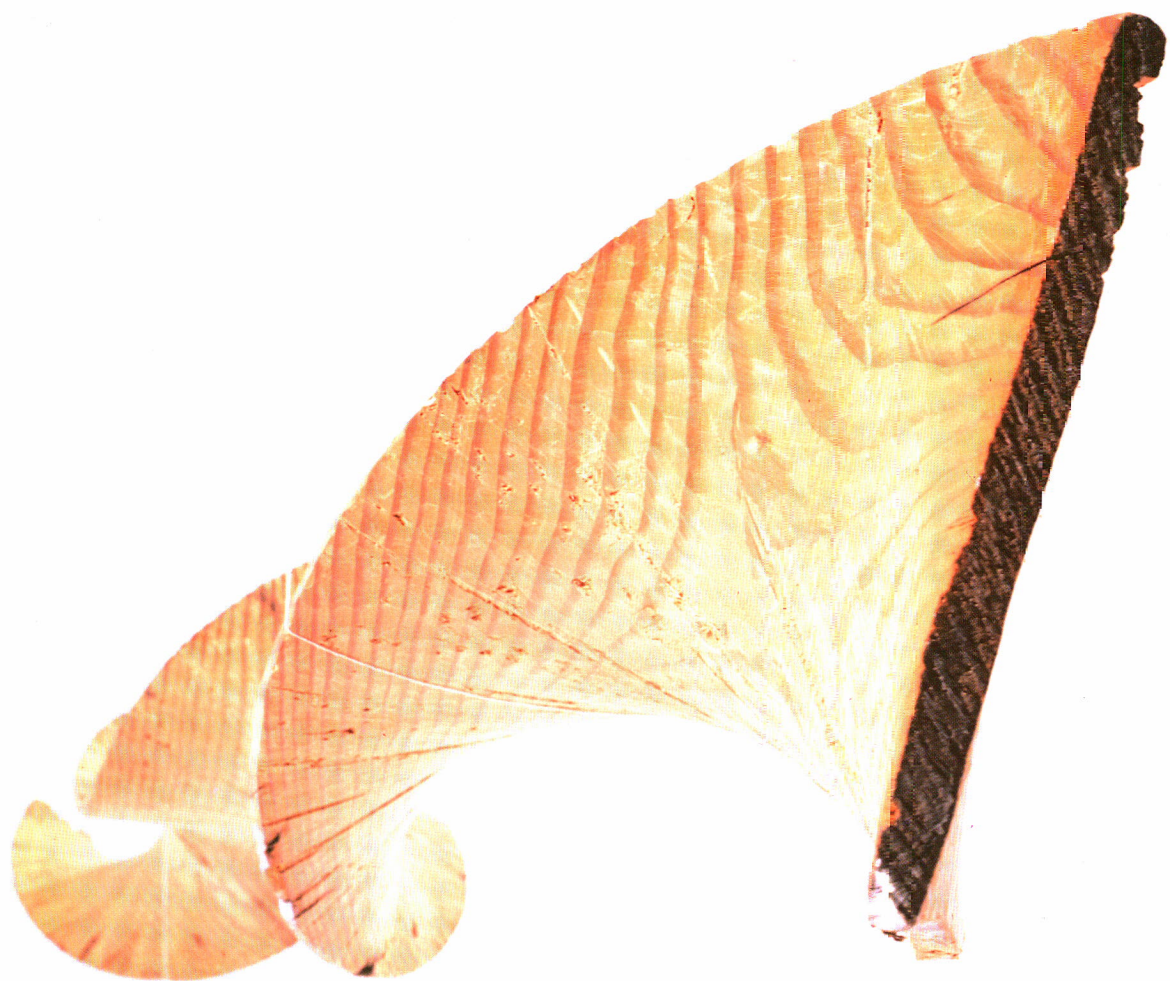




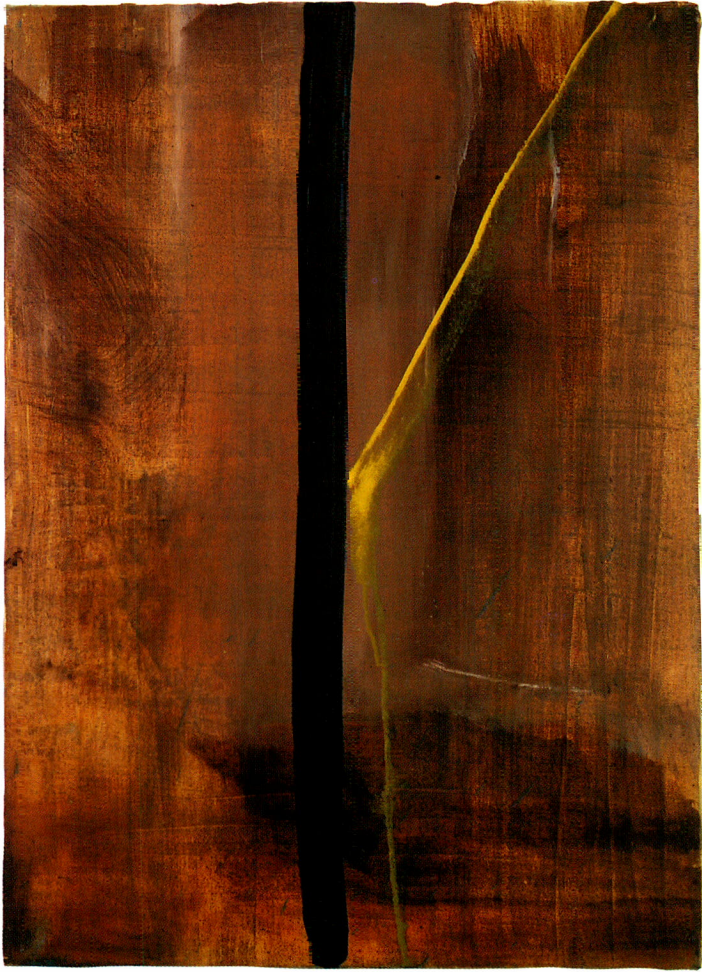




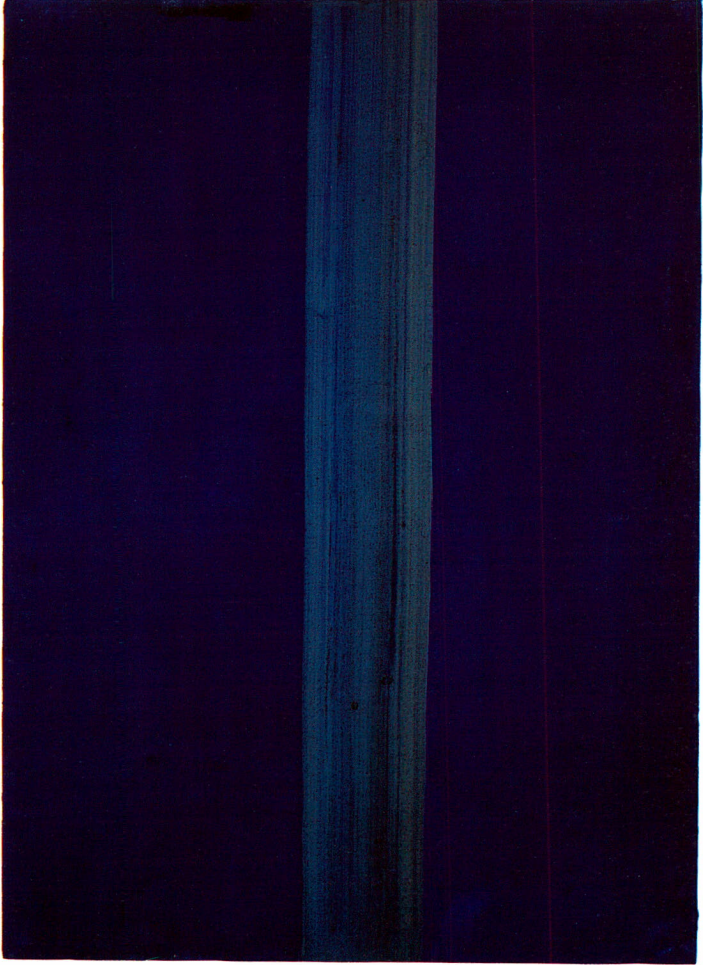


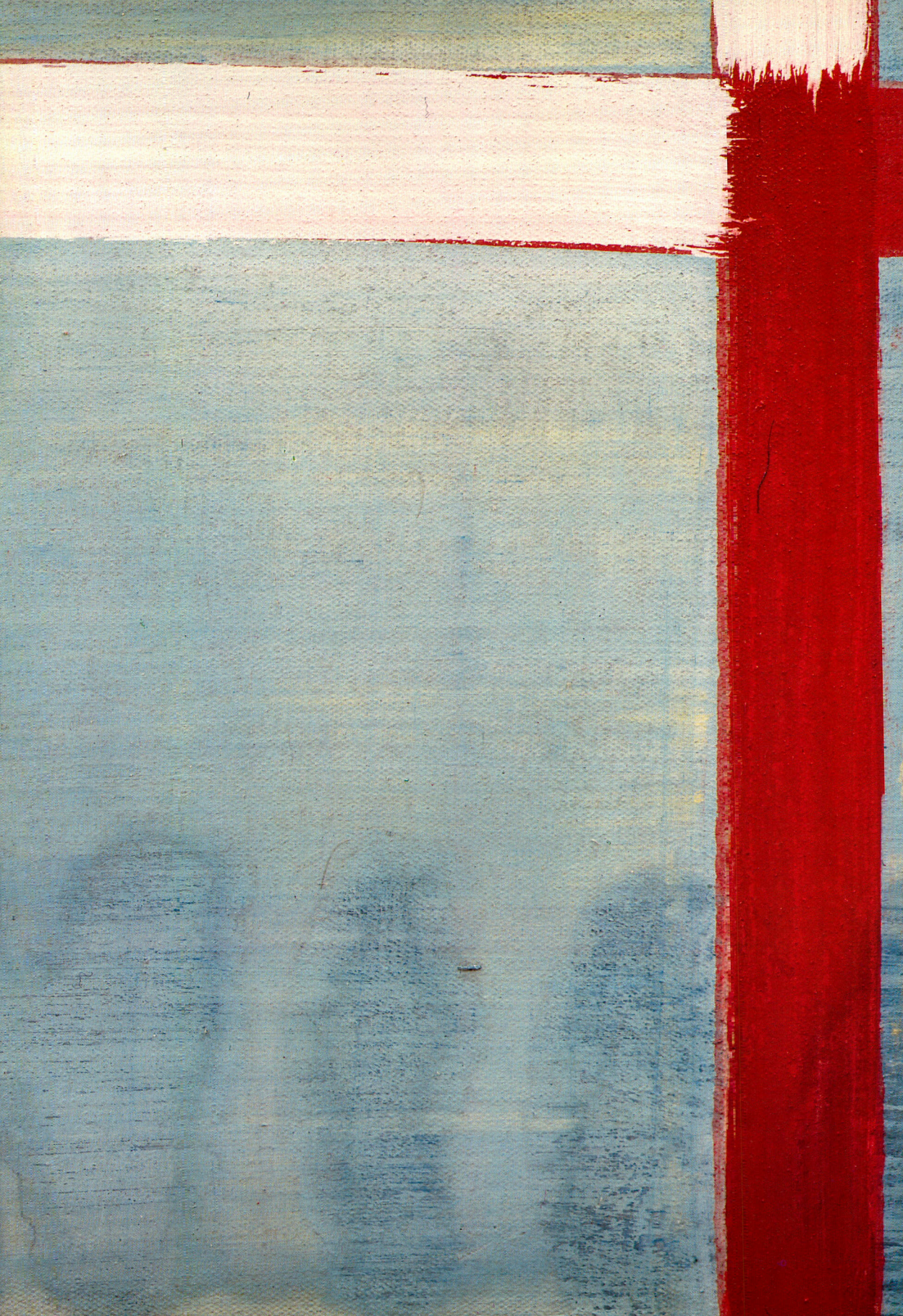


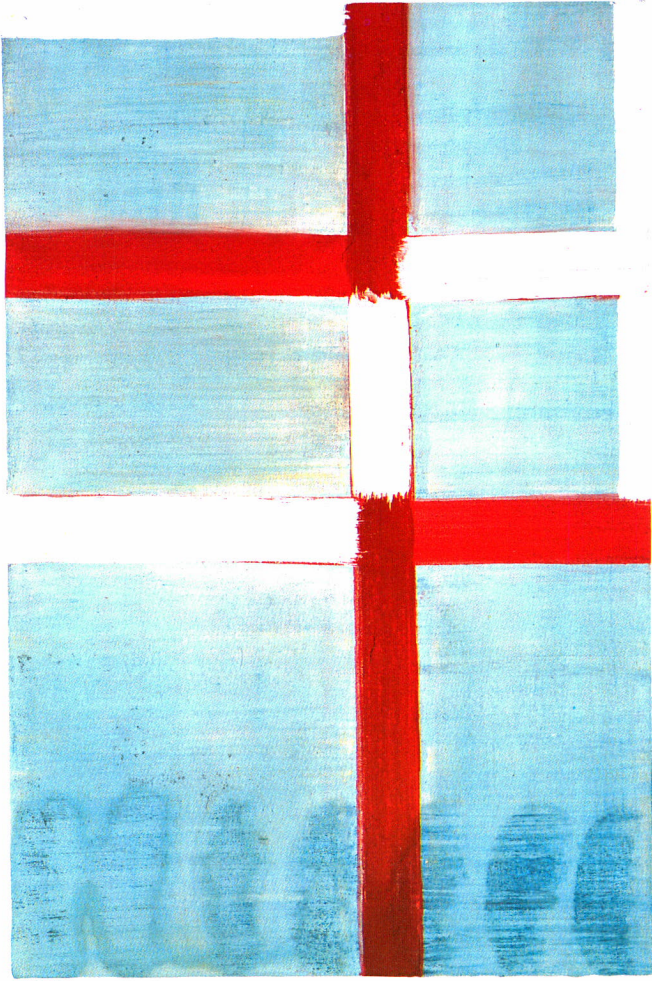


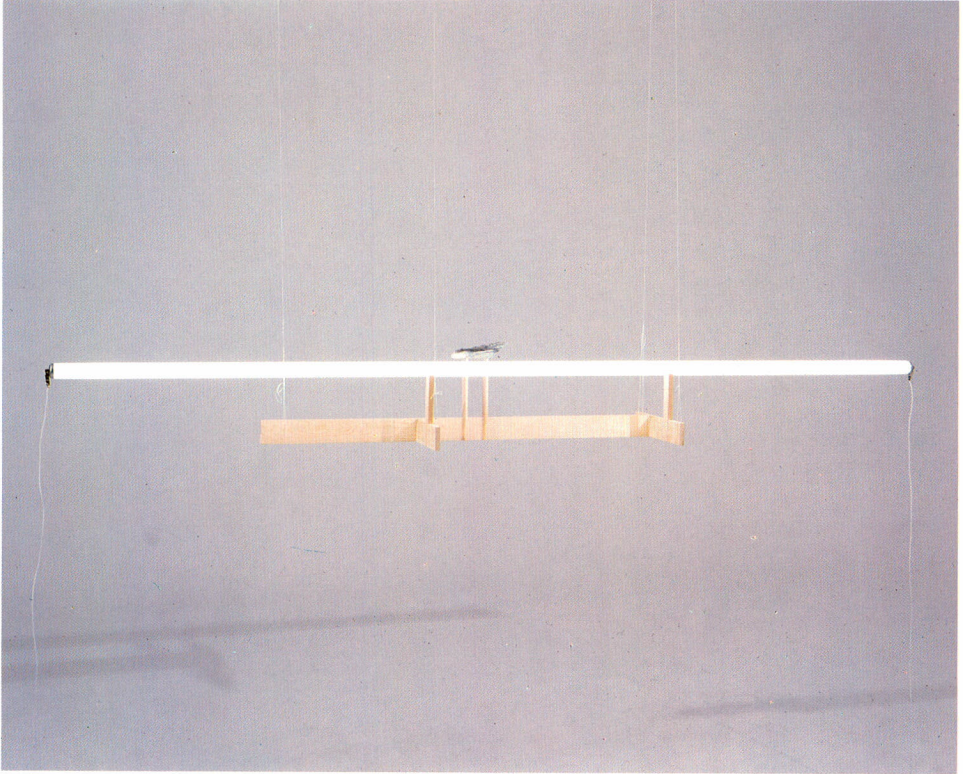


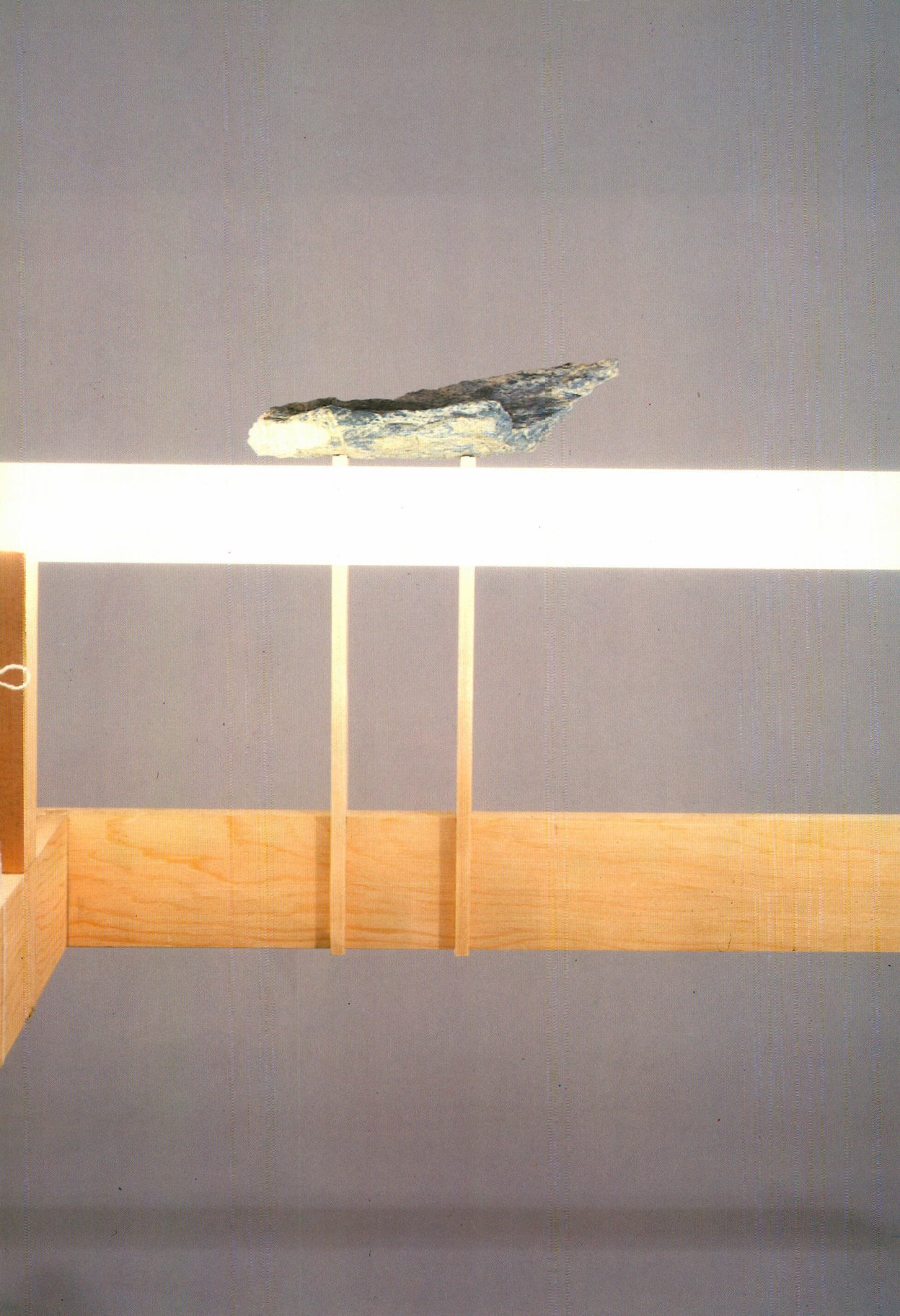


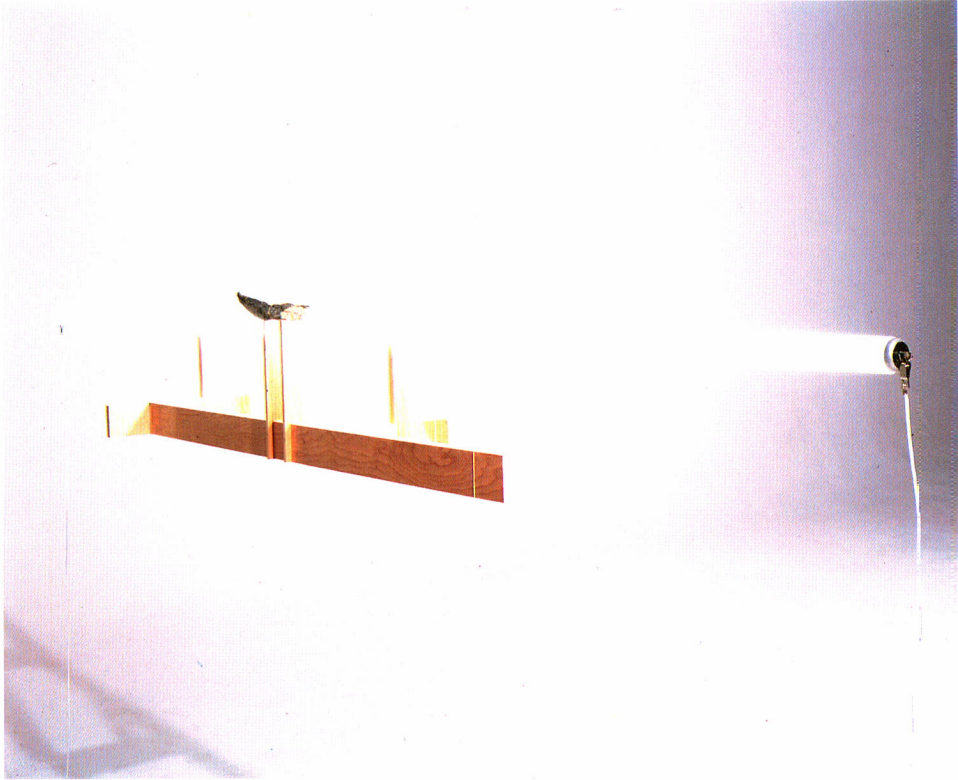


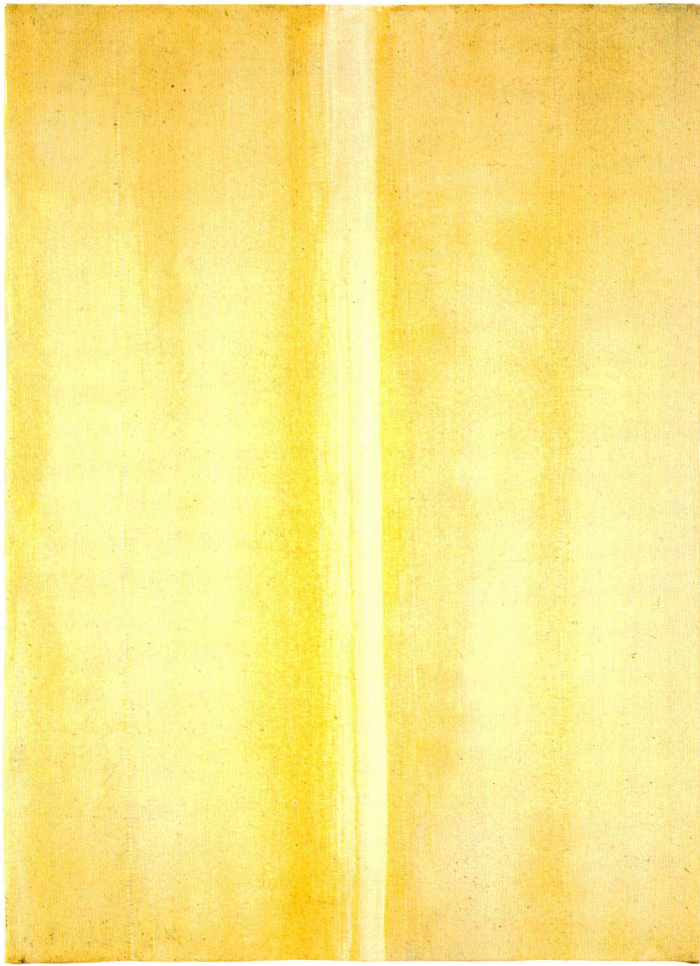








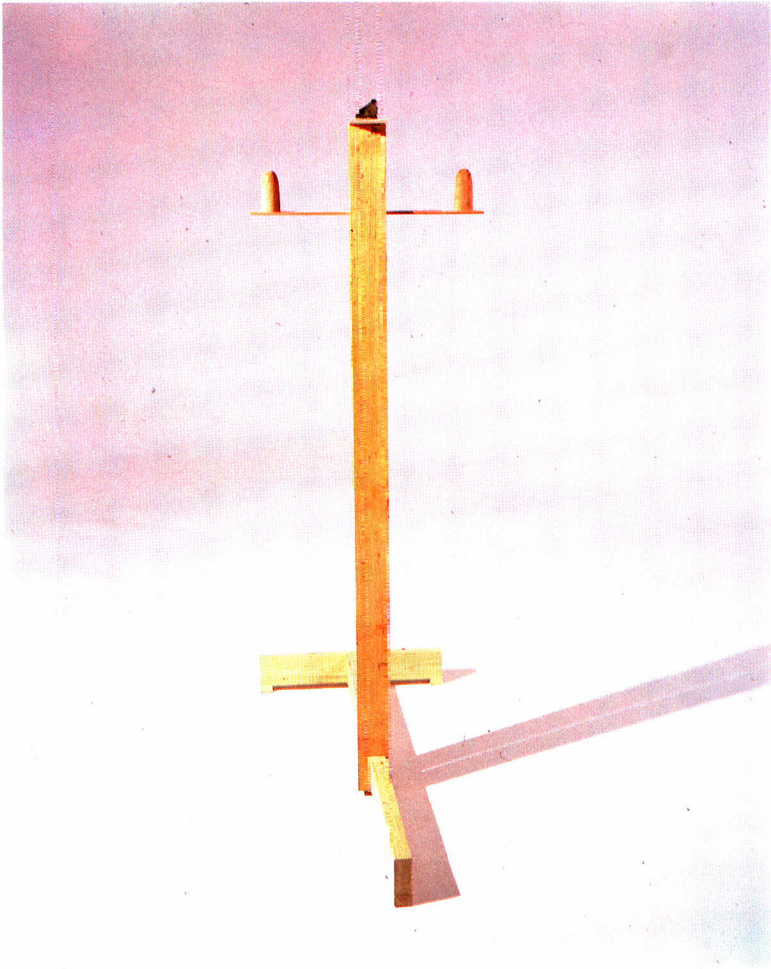


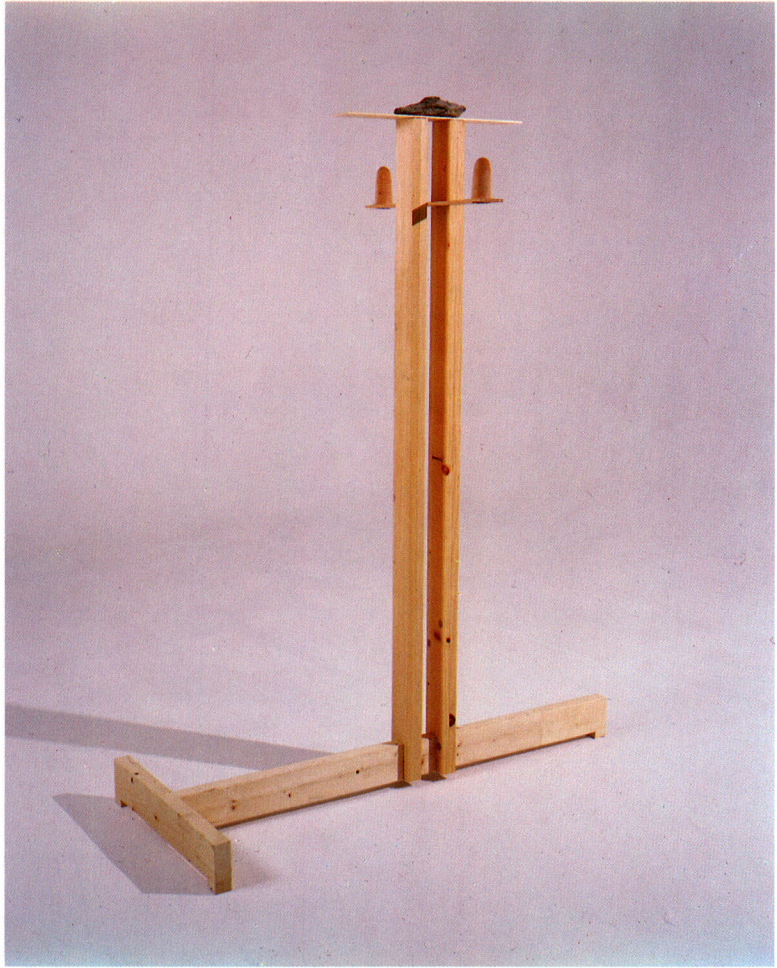


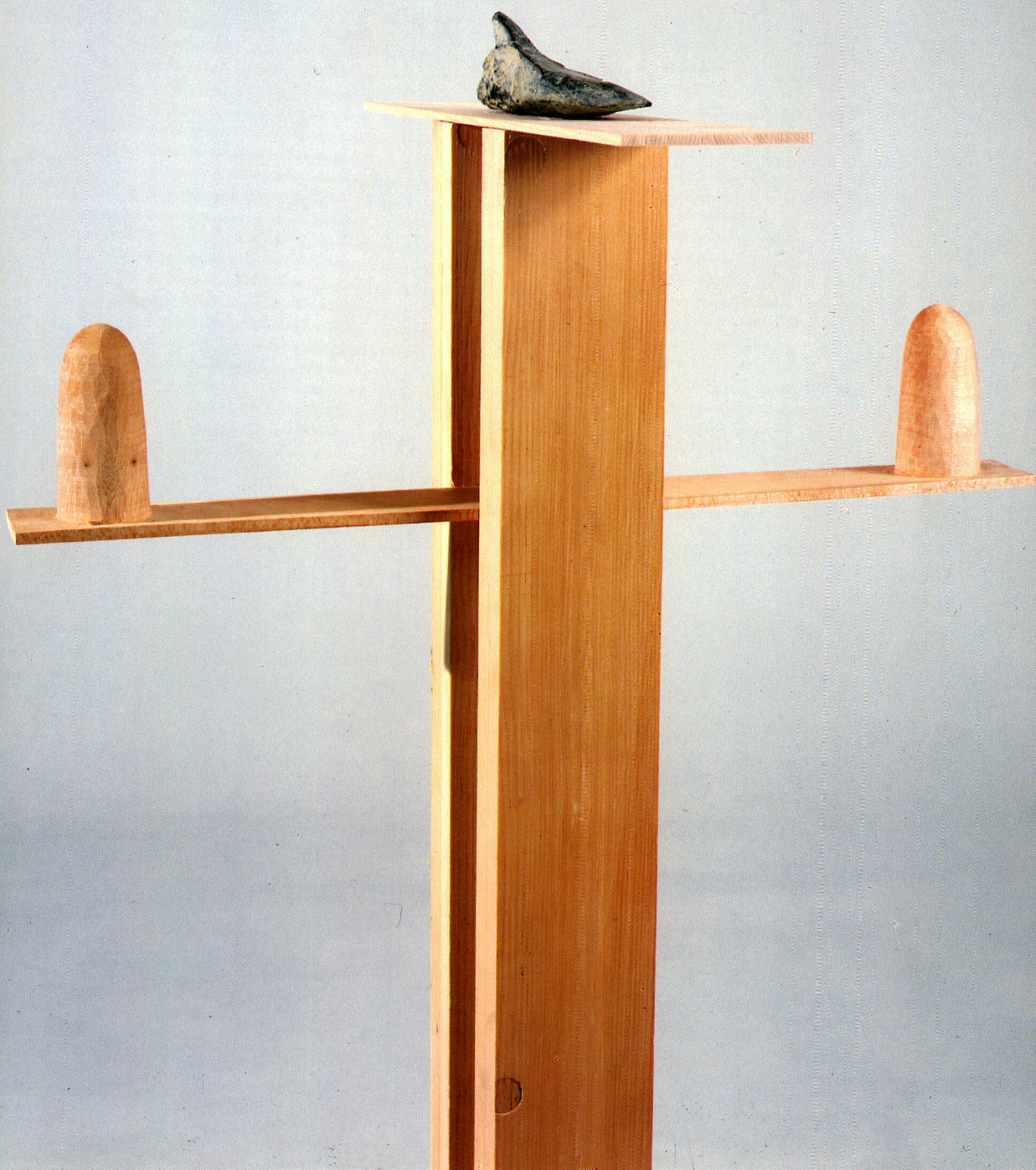


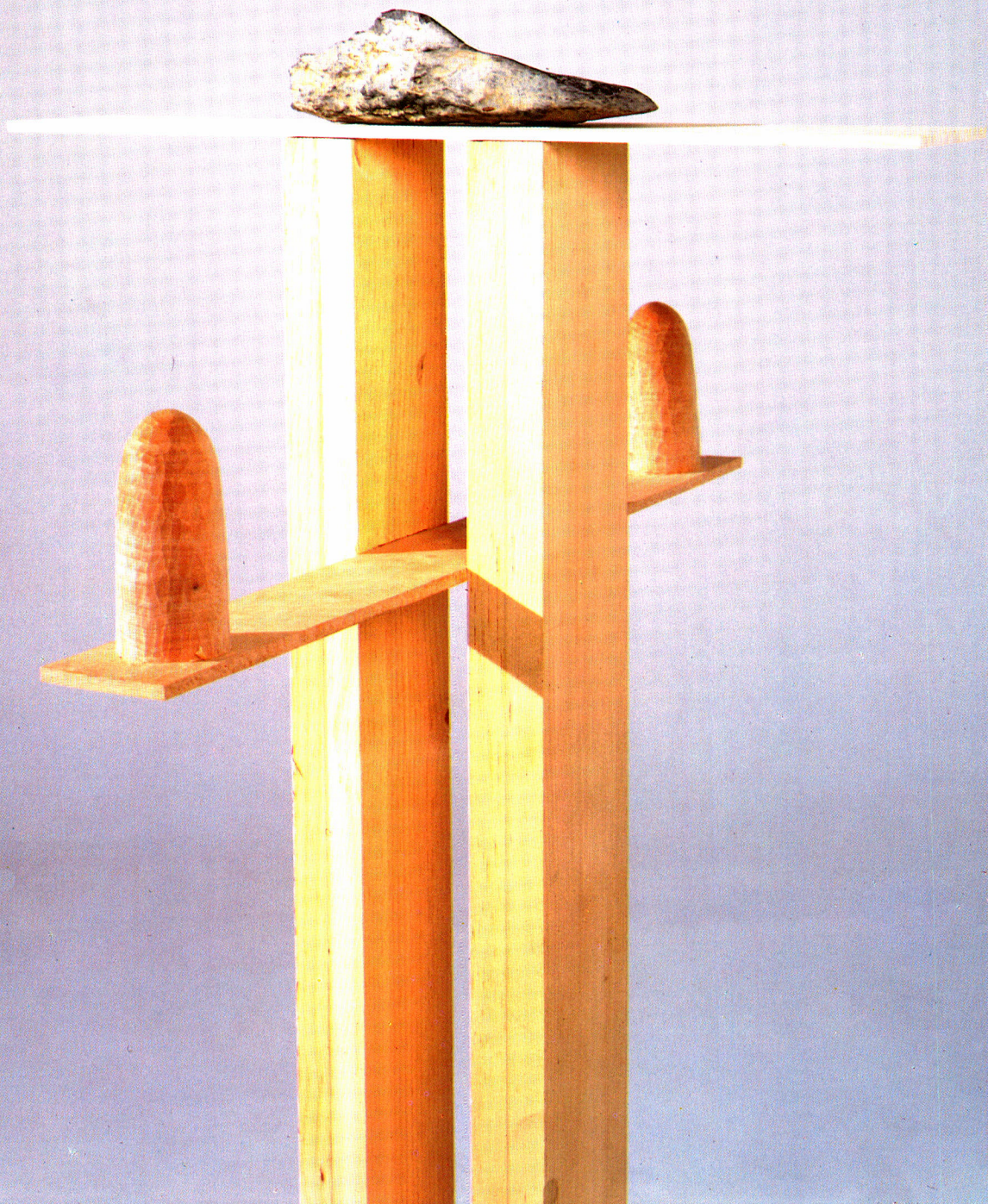












List of Reproductions

Alexander Fischer - Sculptures

Untitled, 1991
Wood, stone.
107 x 8 x 8" / 272 x 20 x 20 cm p.17-20

Untitled, 1991
Wood, stone.
90 x 8 x 8" / 229 x 20 x 20 cm p. 28-32

Untitled, 1991
Fluorescent tube, wood, stone.
92 x 10 x 12" / 234 x 25 x 30 cm p.41-44

Untitled, 1991
Wood, stone.
64 x 50 x 21" / 163 x 127 x 53 cm p. 50-54

Juan Uslé - Paintings

Untitled (Ill Night Series), 1990
Mixed media*, 22 x 16" / 56 x 41 cm p. 21-23

Untitled (Nemaste Series), 1989-1991
Mixed media*, 18 x 12" / 46 x 30 cm p. 24-25

Untitled (Eye and Landscape Series), 1989
Mixed media*, 12 x 22" / 30 x 56 cm p. 27

Untitled (Eye and Landscape Series), 1989
Mixed media*, 12 x 22" / 30 x 56 cm p. 33/35

Untitled (Nemaste Series), 1985
Mixed media*, 18 x 12" / 46 x 30 cm p. 36

Untitled (Stripes Series), 1990-1991
Mixed media*, 22 x 16" / 56 x 41 cm p. 37

Untitled (Nemaste Series), 1989-1991
Mixed media*, 18 x 12" / 46 x 30 cm p. 39/40

Untitled (Stripes Series), 1990-1991
Mixed media*, 22 x 16" / 56 x 41 cm p. 45

Untitled (Stripes Series), 1990-1991
Mixed media*, 22 x 16" / 56 x 41 cm p. 46-48

*)

Mixed media: mostly acrylic or vinyl, dispersion and oil, and pigments on linen; some are painted on plywood instead of linen.

Alexander Fischer		1991	First exhibition in New York
1957	Born in Dagmersellen, Switzerland		Starts project in Nairobi, Africa, with support of PRO HELVETIA, the Swiss Council for the Arts
1974-78	Studies Fine Arts and Crafts "Schule für Gestaltung," Lucerne		Returns to New York
1978-83	Studies Industrial Design at the "Fachklasse für Innenarchitektur und Produktgestaltung" Kunstgewerbeschule, Zurich		
		Solo Exhibitions (Selection)	
		1987	Kunstmuseum Lucerne, Lucerne (Cat.)
1982	Grant Rothschild, Geneva	1988	Galerie Pro(s)art, Lucerne (Cat.)
Since 1983	Designs contemporary furniture, works on sculpture and painting	1990	Galerie Margine, Zurich
		Group Exhibitions (Selection)	
1984	Wins the Swiss Federal Republic Award for Applied Art and Design	1984	<i>La belle et la bête</i> , Möbel per Du, Hamburg, Germany
	First participation in the international exhibition for avant-garde furniture, Möbel per Du, Hamburg, Germany	1986	<i>Gefühlscollagen-Wohnen von Sinnen, Living out of Minds</i> , Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf, Germany; Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, Holland
1986	First important museum exhibition <i>CH '86</i> , with 6 emerging Swiss artists at the Kunstmuseum, Lucerne		<i>Explorations</i> , Designcenter, Stuttgart, Germany
1989	Moves to New York First Artist in Residence, New York Kunsthalle Project	1987	<i>Trigon Biennial '87</i> , Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, Austria

1988 Differenciales, Syndikat,
Bonn, Germany

Since 1987 Lives in New York

1991 *Suspended, Light -
Alexander Fischer &
Juan Uslé*, curated by
Martin Kunz at the
Swiss Institute, New
York

Solo Exhibitions (Selection)

1981 Museo Municipal de
Bellas Artes de
Santander (Cat.)
Galería Ruiz-Castillo,
Madrid

Juan Uslé

1982 Galería Palau, Valencia
(Cat.)

1954 Born in Santander,
Spain

1983 Galería Montenegro,
Madrid

1973-77 Studies Fine Arts at the
Escuela Superior de
San Carlos, Valencia

1984 Galería Ciento,
Barcelona
Fundación Botín,
Santander (Cat.)
Galería Nicanor Piñole,
Gijón

1975-77 Works in collaboration
with Victoria Civera
Combines
photography,
photomontage and
painting

1985 *Currents*, Institute of
Contemporary Art,
Boston
Galería Montenegro,
Madrid
Windsor Kulturgintza,
Bilbao
Galerie 121, Antwerp

1980 Wins a scholarship for
young artists funded by
the Ministry of Culture
of Spain

1986 Galería La Máquina
Española, Seville (Cat.)
Palacete-Embarcadero,
Santander

1982 Grant awarded by the
Ministry of Culture of
Spain

1987 Galería Montenegro,
Madrid (Cat.)
Galerie Farideh Cadot,
Paris

1984 Lecturer in the
Department of Fine
Arts at the University of
Cantabria

1986 Grant for artistic
studies in New York,
awarded by the Comité
Conjunto Hispano-
Norteamericano

1988	Farideh Cadot Gallery, New York (Cat.) Galería Fernando Silio, Santander	1984	<i>IV Bienal Nacional de Arte de Oviedo</i> , Museo de Bellas Artes, Oviedo
1989	Galería Montenegro, Madrid (Cat.) Galerie Farideh Cadot, Paris Farideh Cadot Gallery, New York	1985	<i>XVIII Biennial of Saõ Paolo, Brazil IIIrd International Biennial of Drawings</i> , Nüremberg, Germany; Linz, Austria
1990	Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam (Cat.)	1986	<i>Spanische Bilder</i> ; Kunstverein, Frankfurt Kunstverein, Hamburg; Kunstverein, Stuttgart <i>1981-1986: Pintores y Escultores Españoles</i> , Fundación Caja de Pensiones, Madrid; Fondation Cartier, Jouy- en-Josas, Paris
1991	Galería Soledad Lorenzo, Madrid (Cat.) Palacete-Embarcadero y Nave Sotoliva, Universidad Internacional Menendez Pelayo y Junta del Puerto, Santander (Cat.)	1987	<i>Pintura Española: La generación de los 80</i> , Traveled to Alava, Spain; Santiago, Chile; Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro, Caracas, Mexico

Group Exhibitions (Selection)

1983	<i>26 Pintores, 13 Críticos: Panorama de la Joven Pintura Española</i> , Sala de Exposiciones de la Caja de Pensiones, Madrid (Trav.Exh.) <i>Preliminar</i> , Primera Bienal Nacional de las Artes Plásticas, Museo provincial de Zaragoza (Trav. Exh.) <i>III Salon de los 16</i> , Museo Español de Arte Contemporáneo, Madrid		<i>Spanish Painting in New York: Two Eras</i> , Baruch College Gallery, New York
		1988	<i>Espana Oggi, Artisti Spagnoli, Contemporani</i> , Rotonda di Via Besana and Studio Marconi, Milan
		1988-89	<i>Época Nueva: Painting and Sculpture from Spain</i> , The Chicago Public Library, Cultural Center, Chicago (Trav. Exh.)

- | | | | |
|---------|---|------|---|
| 1989 | <i>Primera Trienal del Dibujo Joan Miró</i> , Fundación Miró, Barcelona | 1989 | Peggy Cyphers, <i>Juan Uslé</i> , New York in Review, Arts Magazine, Oct/Nov 1989 |
| 1990 | <i>Inconsolable: An Exhibition about Painting</i> , Louver Gallery New York, New York
<i>Painting Alone</i> , Pace Gallery, New York
<i>Abstract Painters</i> , L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California | 1990 | Lucinda Barnes, <i>Moment and Memory</i> in catalogue "Imágenes Líricas..." see above. Ed Wingen, <i>Juan Uslé in Search of Romantic Light</i> , Kunstbeeld, p.61, May 1990
Rosa Queralt, <i>Notes del Pintor</i> in catalogue Primera Trienal del Dibujo Joan Miró, Barcelona |
| 1990-91 | <i>Imágenes Líricas - New Spanish Vision</i> , Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; The Queens Museum of Art, New York (Trav. Exh.) | | Jerry Saltz, <i>A Thousand Leagues of Blue, the Recent Paintings of Juan Uslé</i> in catalogue Barbara Farber Gallery, Amsterdam |
| 1991 | <i>Suspended, Light - Alexander Fischer & Juan Uslé</i> , curated by Martin Kunz for the Swiss Institute, New York | | Rainer Crone and David Moos, <i>Painting in a Moment</i> , in catalogue Pace Gallery, New York |

Bibliography

- | | | | |
|---------|---|------|---|
| 1978-89 | See published catalogues | 1991 | Barbara Rose, <i>Beyond the Pyrenees: Spaniards Abroad</i> , The Journal of Art, Feb. p. 28-29
Klaus Ottmann, <i>The Absolute of Passage/Lo Absoluto del pasaje</i> in catalogue Galería Soledad Lorenzo, Madrid |
| 1989 | Juan Uslé, Williamsburg, Pinturas 1988/1989, published by the Camara de Comercio, Industria y Navegación de Cantabria with texts by Dan Cameron and Kevin Power | | |

March/April
Martin Kunz,
Suspended, Light-
Alexander Fischer &
Juan Uslé in catalogue,
The Swiss Institute,
New York
Constanza Gonzales,
Romances: Juan Uslé,
Capital, Nr 2, 1991,
p. 44-47
Rainer Crone and
David Moos, *Like Steel*
Being Pulled Apart, in
catalogue "Juan Uslé:
Ultramar," Santander,
Spain

Legends

- Cat:** Exhibition catalogue
with extensive text on
the respective artist
- Trav. Exh.** Traveling exhibition
with a partial list of
participating institutions
that are not credited in
detail

Swiss Institute
35 West 67th Street
New York, N.Y. 10023
Phone (212) 496-1759

Gallery Hours
Monday - Sunday, 2-7 pm
Closed on Wednesdays

Director: Ariane Briallard
Administrative
Coordinator: Elisabeth Schuler
Press Officer: Ursula Biemann

This catalogue is published by the Swiss Institute in New York as part of the exhibition SUSPENDED, LIGHT-Alexander Fischer & Juan Uslé (March 21-April 25, 1991) PRO HELVETIA, the Swiss Council for the Arts, and CASA DE ESPAÑA in New York, both made this exhibition and publication possible.

Guest Curator: Martin Kunz
Editor and Designer: Martin Kunz
Copy Editor: Victoria Pedersen
Translator: Jürgen Riehle
Photo credits: Bill Orcutt
Production: Delano Greenidge
Editions, New York
Typesetting: Rick Griffith, New York
Printed in Berlin, Germany
Copyright 1991 © The Swiss Institute,
New York & the author

$$\frac{52 \sqrt{140}}{2}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} 2500 \\ 52 \overline{) 1250} \\ \underline{1040} \\ 2100 \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} 2700 \\ 52 \overline{) 1350} \\ \underline{1040} \\ 3100 \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} 2700 \\ 52 \overline{) 1350} \\ \underline{1040} \\ 3100 \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} 2700 \\ 52 \overline{) 1350} \\ \underline{1040} \\ 3100 \end{array}$$

$$\boxed{2700}$$