

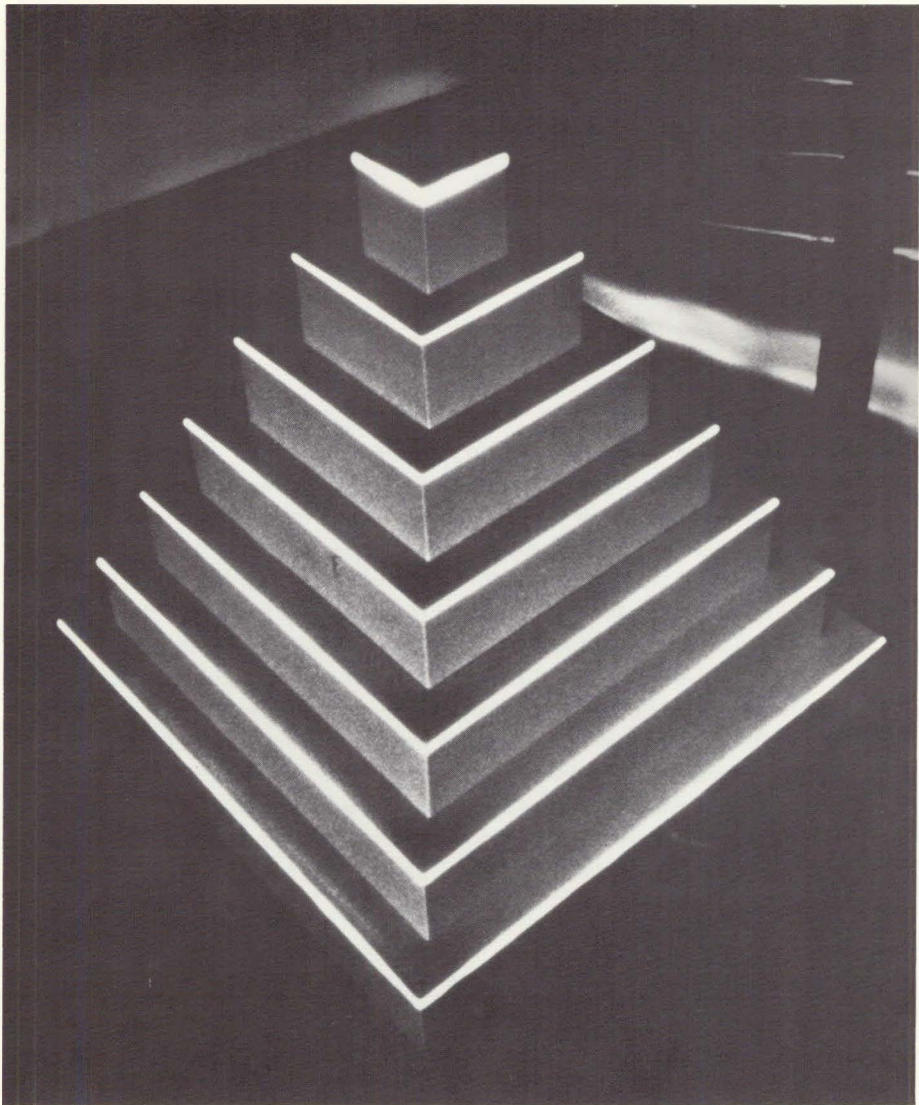
AI McWilliams / RECENT SCULPTURE

PREFACE

In the last two years (1981-3), McWilliams has exhibited four major sculptures: *Suspended Animation* and *Wall* at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, *Axaxaxas mlö* at the Vancouver Art Gallery, and *Ruminations on a Set of Circumstances* at the Kunstverein in Stuttgart. To provide context for these pieces it is necessary to go back to the three-dimensional works McWilliams made in the 60s.

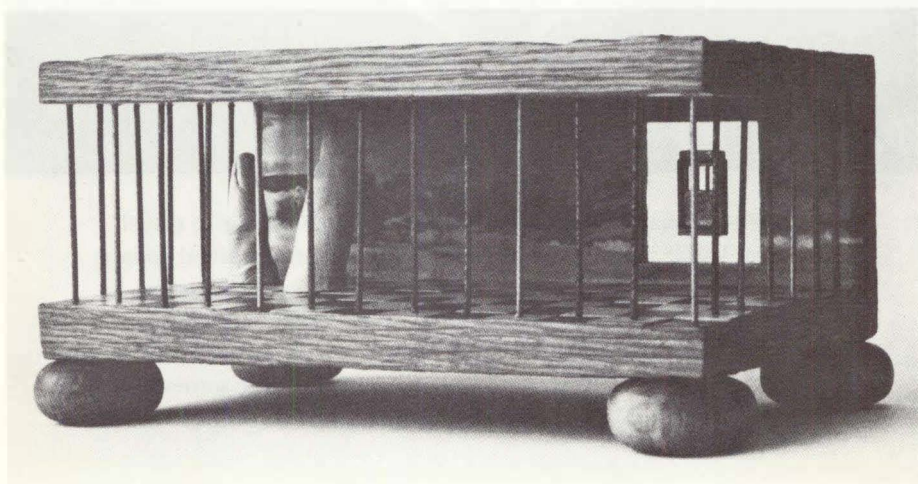
In that period McWilliams, like many artists, constructed objects that fell into the category of Minimal Art fulfilling the "Less is More" dictum established in architecture by Meis van der Rohe's black tower Seagrams Building; in painting, by the deceptively simple red/yellow/blue colour fields of Ellsworth Kelly; in sculpture, by the stainless steel, stacked rectangles of Donald Judd. The first sculptures created in this vein were three untitled works which foreshadow the architectural scale and theme of McWilliams' recent pieces.

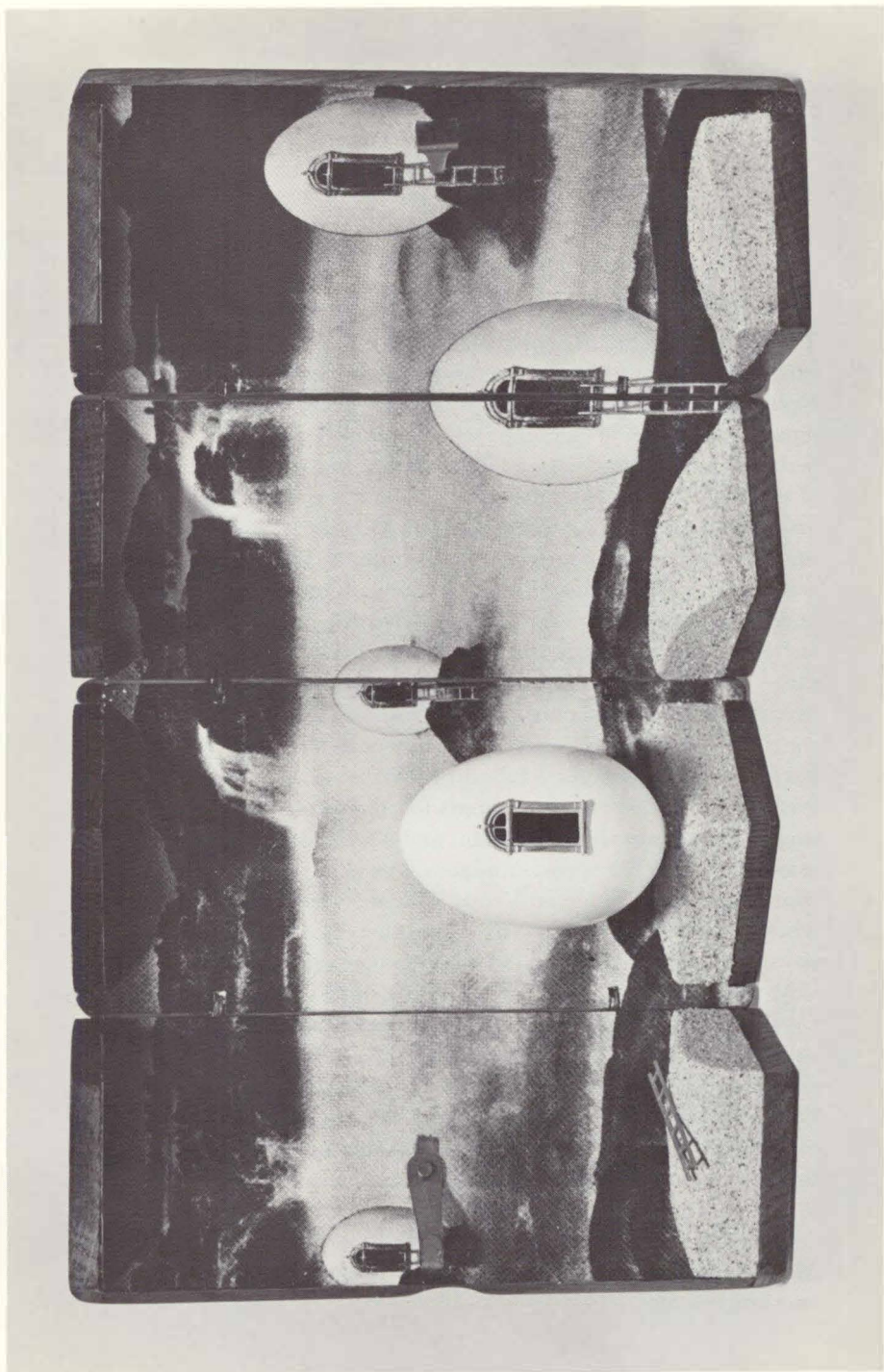
These were a tall, thin vertical red beam, a two-part, overscale blue arch, a seven stage yellow sculpture prescient to the ziggurat of *Axaxaxas mlö*. In the 60s works, enamel and resin gleamed; the mirroring surfaces softened the solidity of the pieces. In the 80s, the copper of *Axaxaxas mlö* and *Ruminations* . . . achieves a similar effect. The 60s works had bevelled edges of plexiglas so that when lit from within these edges read as lines of light illuminated by a concealed source. Now McWilliams uses electric light and propane flame to evoke similar mysteries.¹ There is, hence, a satisfying continuity in McWilliams' art. But at a certain point he moved abruptly away from Minimal impersonality towards the themes and content which occupy him now.



In 1969, a Canada Council grant enabled McWilliams to travel to Europe. While abroad, he made little boxes that contained collage and tiny clues from the foreign environments. When he returned, he was unable to complete the Minimal works he left behind. He committed himself for a decade to works on a small scale that were personal and elusive in content. The earliest of these are somewhat cognizant of the cityscapes, the art he'd seen while travelling.

Ode to Uncle Alex (1972) is a four inch high wooden cage containing a sky-painted backdrop set over a plaza floor. To the left on the miniature white and black tiles of the plaza, one discovers plaster casts of the upper portions of two fingers that serve as monumental sculpture in the environment. Placed on the skydrop to the right is a framed window embellished with a centrally placed unopened (unopenable) door. One is reminded of: European finch cages; the fragments of Classical sculpture; Renaissance perspectives of ideal cities; de Chirico pre-Surrealist cityscapes where sculptural fragments are set near oversized artichokes and undersized people — of everything but of nothing one may lay a finger on. The cage is empty. It expects, wants something that the viewer's imagination can provide, or it exacts from him an agreement with the allusive nostalgia of the piece where the ode, the tribute will not be voiced and where Uncle Alex will be forever anonymous.²

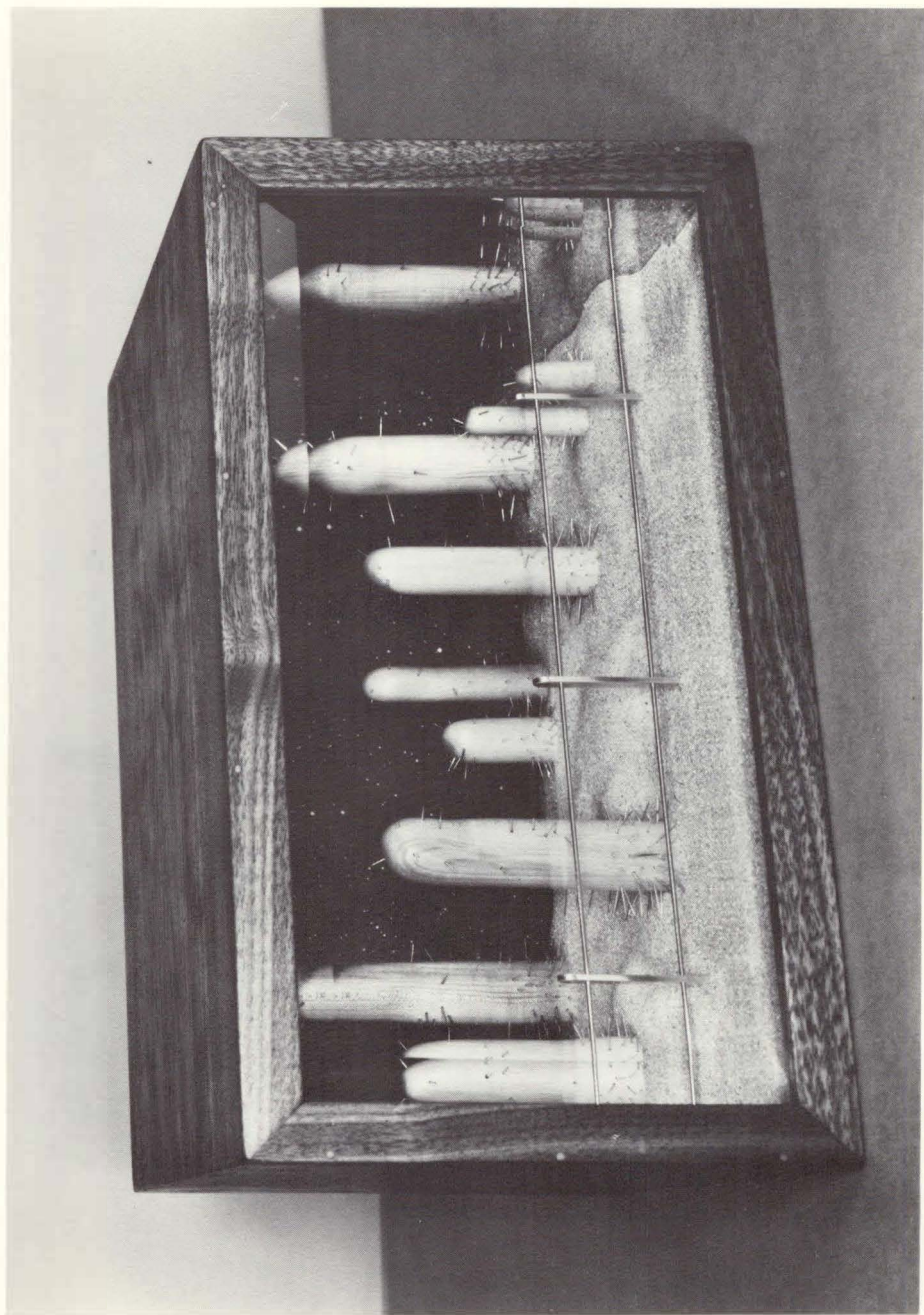


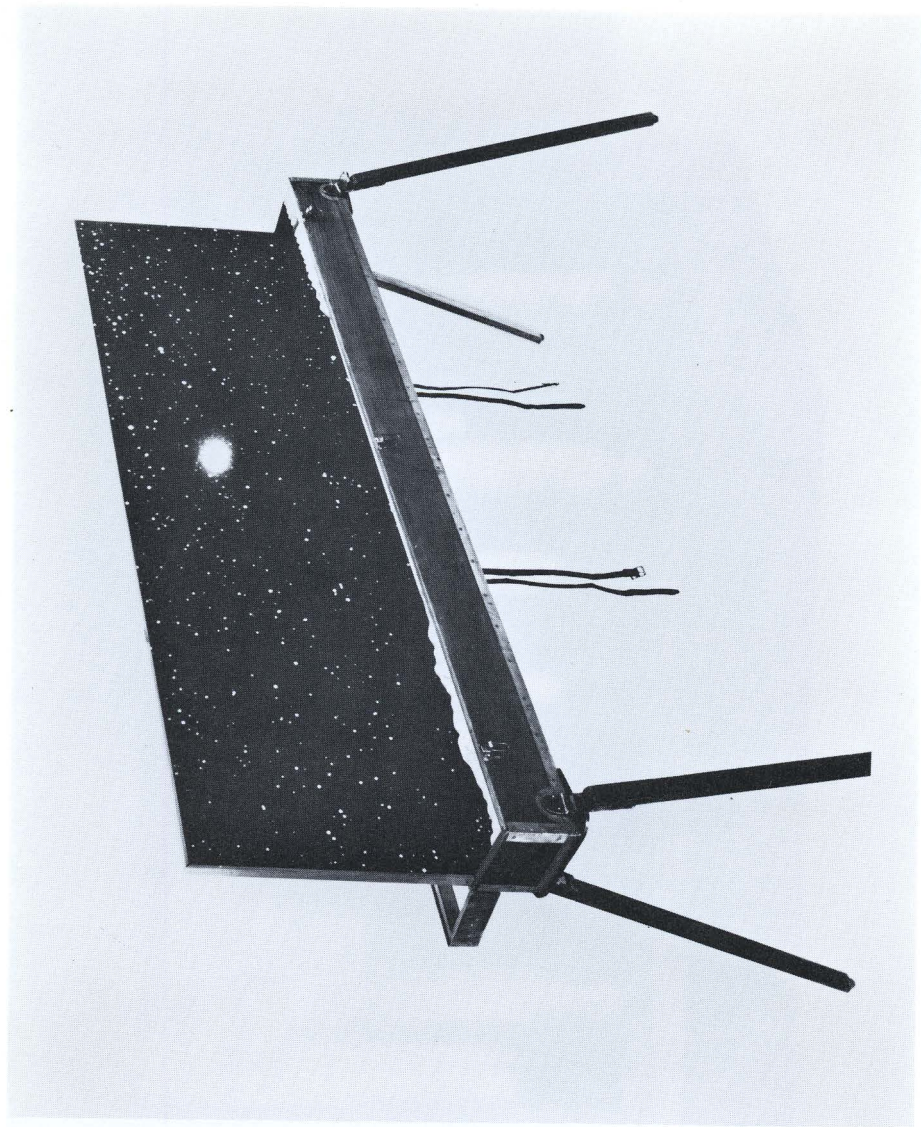


Ode to Uncle Alex was large in comparison to the miniature sculptures McWilliams constructed within hinged walnut shells; sturdy in contrast to the fragile egg houses he made for other works.³ *Eggscapade 1* (1975), when open, is not two inches deep, yet it represents an infinite landscape where recluses in huts perhaps perform ceaseless meditations. The rushing waters, the veiling mists of the landscape are set, improbably, behind the arid, desert, foreground perch of the Egghouse. A ladder discarded to the left suggests that an occupant is trapped within. *Eggscapade 1*, in part, accords with a Surrealist (Freudian) view of inner reality, the unconsciousness which we most freely visualize in our dreams and in our uncensored fantasies. But unlike Dali and Ernst in their early works, McWilliams is not creating art from a need for psycho-sexual examination; his Surrealism is more literary, more controlled. *Eggscapade 1* is as scrupulously particular and conscious as is a short story by Borgès, a fabulist McWilliams admires. It begs a story that the artist creates an arena for, one which the spectator may supply. Each story will be different and it will depend upon the associations the piece evokes: mine will be about religious fanatics; yours might concern life on Venus. The story, however, should not be written down for that would fix it, and thereby destroy the artist-object-viewer chain of sent and received non-verbal communications.

McWilliams' last contained world in a small scale was *Cactus Garden* (1976). A perfect universe resides within this glass-fronted wooden box. A photo image of a night sky sets the illusory scale for giant wooden cacti studded with steel pins set into a sandy garden. Plants, thumbs, phalluses transformed, they are like the skyscrapers of a futuristic city electric-fenced against invasion, fenced to contain the electricity they generate, as the hairs on our necks rise in response to them.

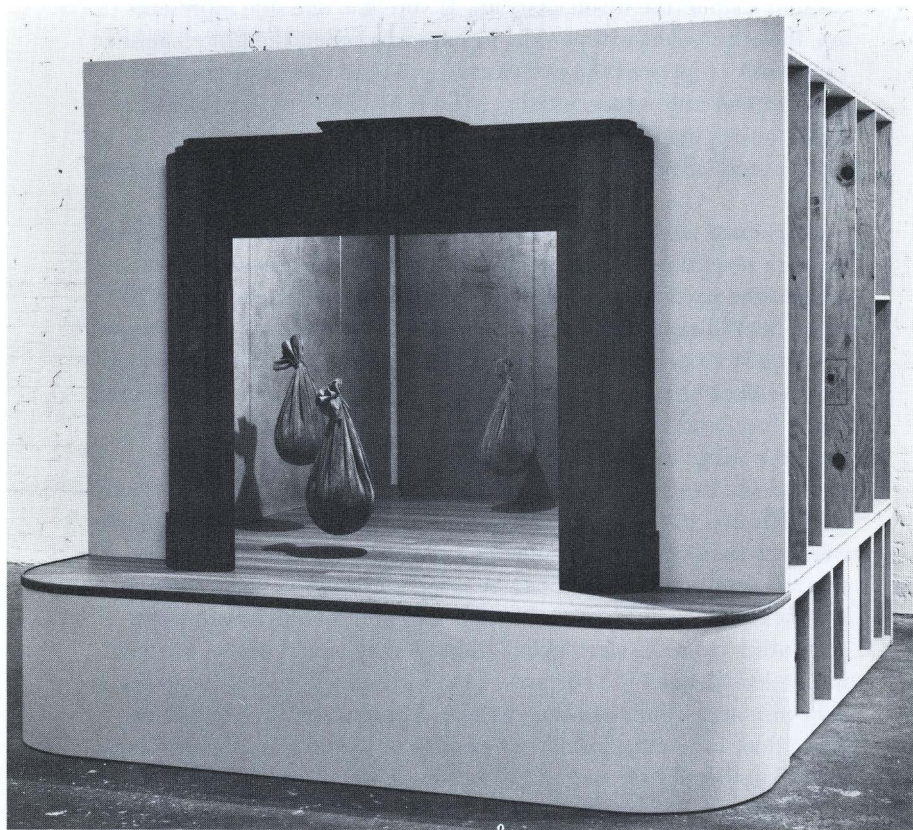
After *Cactus Garden*, with *Moonscape for Mathew* (1977) McWilliams "unboxed" his universes and began to conceive of them on a larger scale.



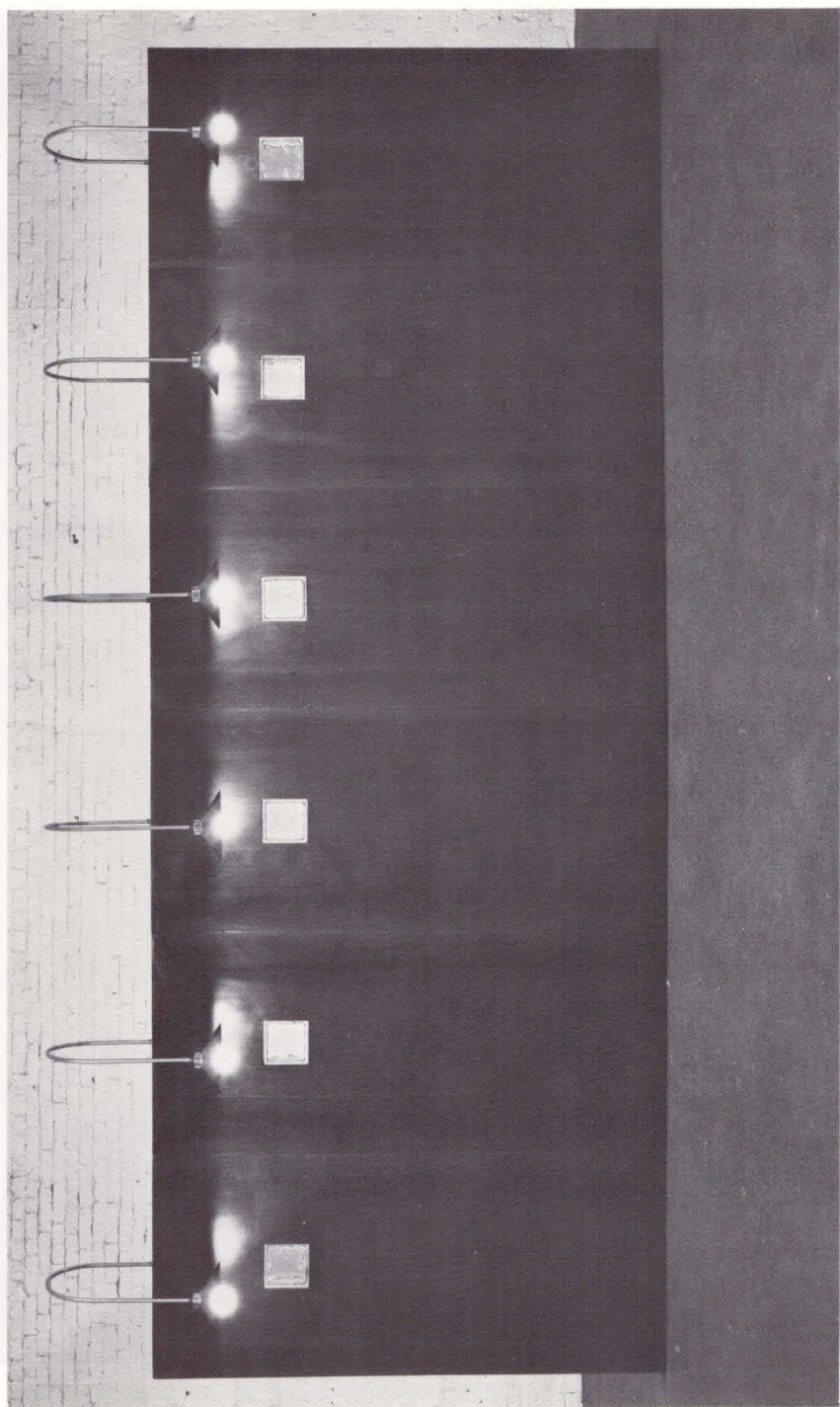


McWilliams equipped a found-object carrying case with a slot-in panel. On the front face of the panel is a representation of a starry sky as though recorded from the vantage point of a satellite. Below, within the box, is a low relief model in carved wood of the crater-marked surface of the moon. On the reverse side the panel is a gridded drawing of the location of the stars and beneath it is a contour map of the moon's terrain. If you like, one side represents art, the other science. One side, infinity; the other, the finite. Neither (and both) represent the real worlds we know. The piece implies past, present and future activity. Who is Mathew? Will Mathew come to tuck the panel under his arm, to carry the case away? *Moonscape for Mathew* brings us to the edge of McWilliams' present work.

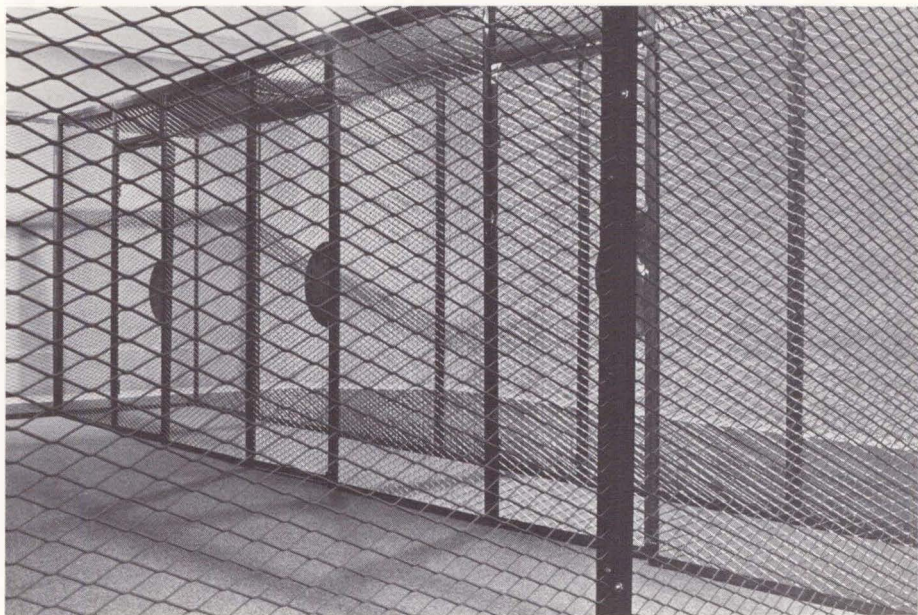
Suspended Animation — the first of the four recent pieces — went through several preliminary stages that link it in every aspect but scale to the portable works it follows. It had its beginnings in 1976 when McWilliams was doing *Cactus Garden*. While his fingers were bleeding from pressing needles into the cacti, he was thinking about Samuel Beckett and a scene he thought he had read. He remembered that a bag came down from the ceiling and a long stick came out from the wings to menace it time and time again until, finally, it stabbed the bag and, at that moment, the stage curtains dramatically shut. His first important conceptualization for *Suspended Animation* was for a small stage-like box with a pin-studded floor.⁴ There was a centrally placed suspended bag between curtains drawn to each side. The next sketch eliminated the floor pins and included two spikes emanating from the side walls as though they would pierce the bag suspended between the curtains. The third sketch reintroduced the floor pins and eliminated the curtains. There were three bags now and a door on the back wall reminiscent of the door in *Ode to Uncle Alex*. Another sketch and accompanying notes suggest that the floor of *Suspended Animation* at one time was visualized as a moonscape companion to *Mathew's* piece. McWilliams checked out Beckett and discovered that the scene he so vividly recalled was almost totally unlike the one he read. The memory served as a stimulation to a number of ideas which ultimately led to the theatre-like environment of *Suspended Animation* as completed in 1981. In this sculpture, a found-object mantle-piece proscenium makes a "life-size" spatial referent for the presumed miniature action one imagines to take place within/among the suspended pigskin bags.



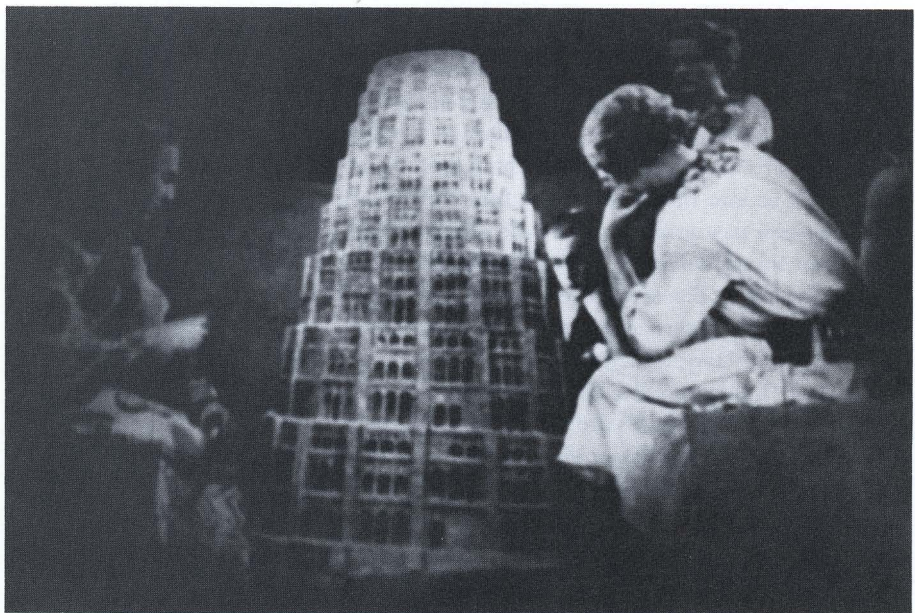
Wall is a free-standing, strut-supported wall with strong allusions to theatrical flats (although it is more sturdy) and to demolition sites where a single outer wall (surprisingly fragile) is all that remains or is all that encloses. *Wall* is in a life-like scale but its accoutrements — opaque glass brick windows, operating electric lights — are improbable and elevate *Wall* from representationalism to mystery. Wire mesh

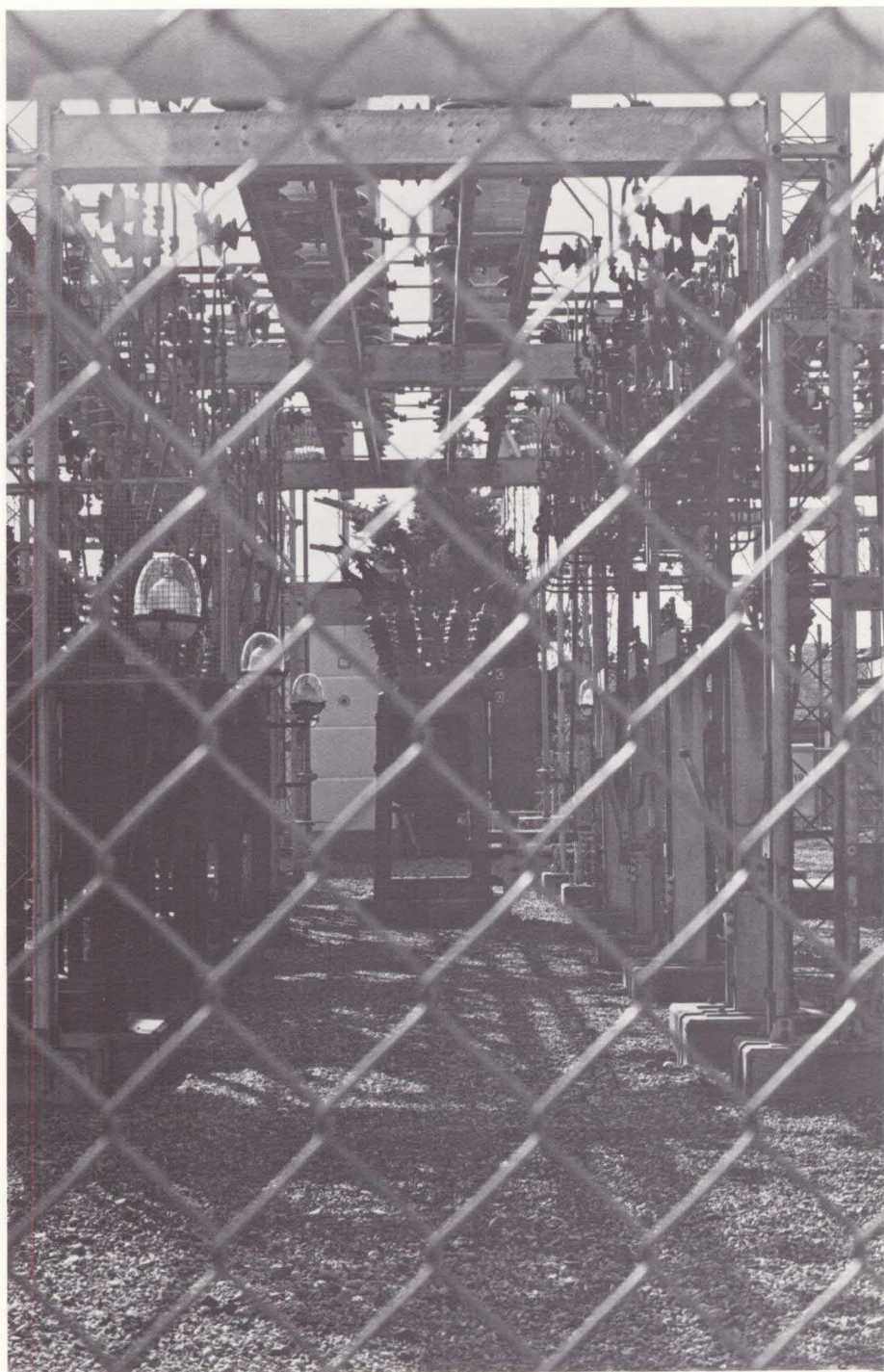






fences and gates lend a similar industrial urban feel to the enclosure for the copper ziggurat at the heart of *Axaxaxas mlö*. This piece is as ambivalently evocative as was *Ode to Uncle Alex*. Is it a compound or a shrine? Is it a site from which there is no escape or does the site bring us into the freedom of a fourth dimension hovering delicately between past and future? As do all his works, *Axaxaxas mlö* reminds us of things we know — in this case, Sumer, Egypt, cemeteries, substations. The sculpture sprang from association as diverse as: Breughel's *Tower of Babel*; the great mosque of Al-Mutawakki in Samarra, Iraq; a scene from a film called "Metropolis" by Fritz Lang. The expanded steel enclosures refer to the electrical substations that for McWilliams are the awe-inspiring equivalents of the ancient shrine, possessors of contemporary energy with forms and wires that offer parallels to our inner (mental or physical) circuitry. A soundtrack of barking dogs (recorded at the Mortuary Temple of Ramesses II in Gournah, Egypt) created a third element for the sculpture and expanded its physical boundaries. The track brought to the work the allusion of Egyptian dog Guardians of the Dead and to me (co-incidentally) the auditory threat of the vicious canines who safekeep construction sites.







Like *Axaxaxas mlö*, *Ruminations on a Set of Circumstances* is a rich, associative amalgam. The past of cathedral thrones is adjusted through the present of office chairs. Where one expects a canopy one finds futuristic haloes, the copper rings.⁵ The overscale chair, fire burning at its feet, is like a throne for God and functions like the ziggurat in the mysteries and ceremonies it implies.

McWilliams believes that his sculptures are successful in the measure that they achieve "a sense of spirit, a presence of their own," quite separate from anything he desired to impose upon them. For him, two very important aspects of "three-dimensional work are space and spatial relationships." By placing things very specifically — objects, perimeters — "a resonance can occur, a resonance that can allow a person who approaches the sculptures different levels of access, and a possibility to become aware of the different harmonies and tensions incorporated there." It is the third person (the viewer) who "activates the piece."⁶

All McWilliams' works from the 60s to the present are concerned with allusions (subliminal and overt), are made of materials which in themselves carry meaning (the glint of steel; the electroconductive power of copper; the rustic simplicity of wood). They bring together elements from the past, present and future. They expect witnesses, interpreters, ceremonial users. Uncle Alex, Mathew, you and me.

ANN ROSENBERG

NOTES:

- ¹ Before McWilliams went to Europe, he experimented with fire pieces in his Empire Building studio using alcohol as fuel.
- ² *Uncle Alex* was a studio mate of McWilliams. Alex McConnell's finger casts are the monument in the plaza. The *Mathew of Moonscape for Mathew* is McWilliams' young son. To know who is referred to in these titles makes no difference to the interpretation of the works.
- ³ McWilliams made sculpture from eggs (real and fabricated) as early as 1971.
- ⁴ There are several sketches for works with suspended bags which precede those referred to, but they are for works that have not the stage-like quality of *Suspended Animation*.
- ⁵ Because of its height, McWilliams had no opportunity to erect *Ruminations* . . . before installing it in Stuttgart. If he shows the piece again, he is considering adjusting the rings so that the arrangement is tighter, more tense. He considered (but has since discarded) the notion of adding a sound element to the work.
- ⁶ Notes from McWilliams' sketchbook.

SUSPENDED ANIMATION

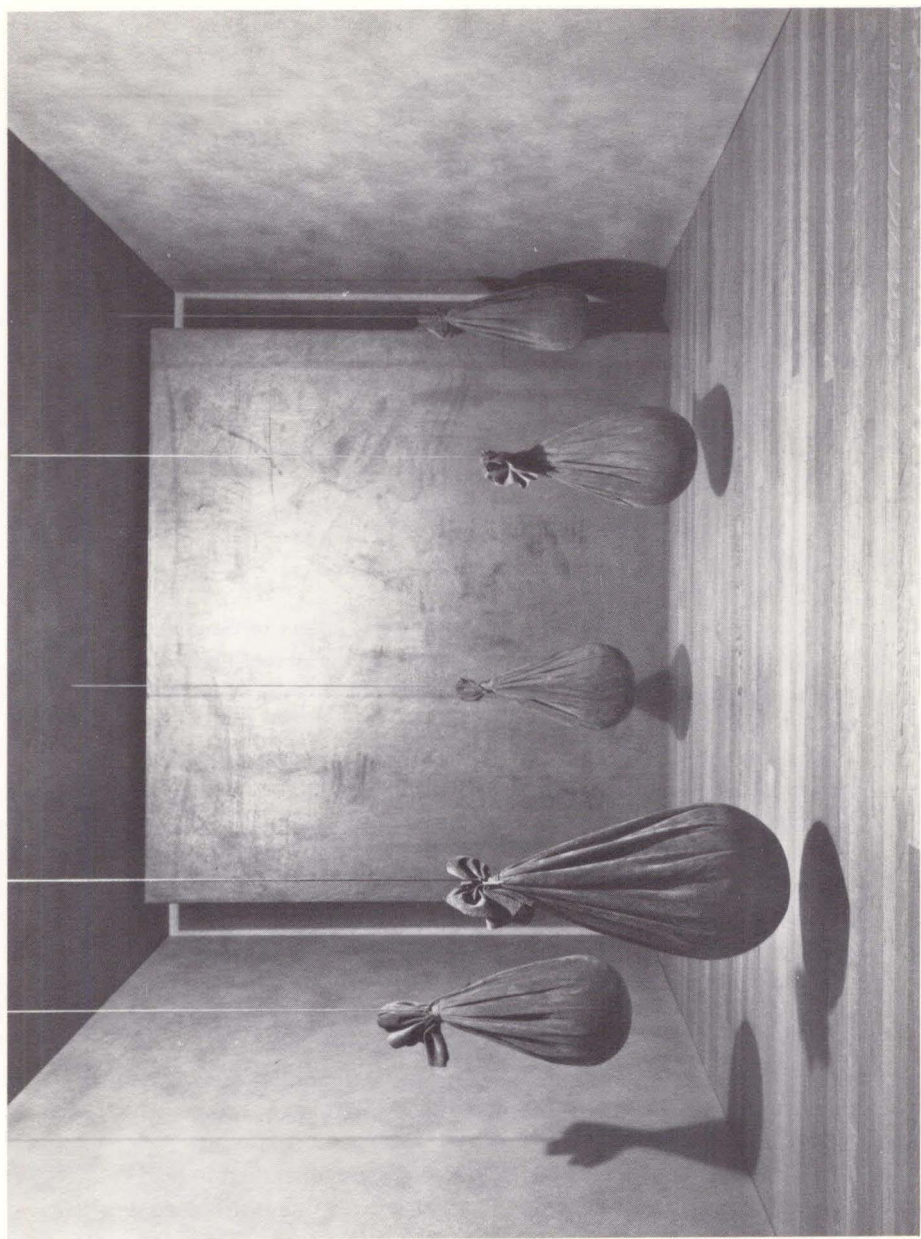
Suspended Animation was first exhibited with *Wall* at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 1981. It was set into a false wall.

A small theatre is revealed through a fireplace mantle proscenium. Within the room concealed light illuminates five grey pigskin bags suspended at varying levels from the ceiling. The walls of the room are covered in softly rubbed, grey graphite of exactly the same shade and texture as the pigskin bags. Into the floor a foot in front of the back wall, a flat slab of grey lead has been slotted.

The carefully crafted wooden floor is tilted up and the side walls are raked in to create a distorted perspective that illusionistically increases the interior dimension of the miniature stage.

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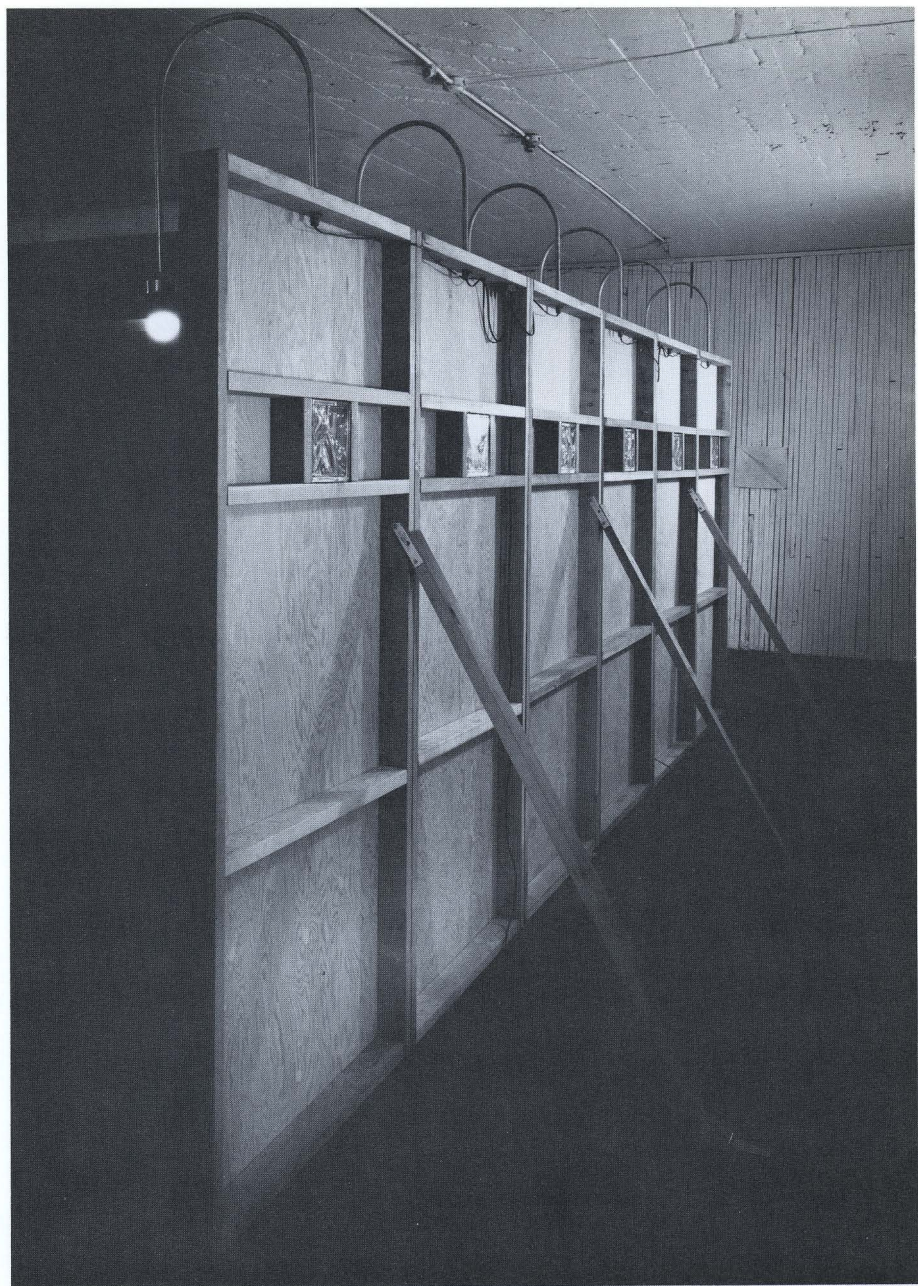
WALL

Wall was built and shown in 1981 at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. The work is approximately 20 feet long, 9 feet high, and varies in thickness from 3 feet (the buttresses) to about 4 inches (the wall itself).

Both facades of *Wall* are important. When installed at Victoria the viewer encountered the back of the sculpture first. The rear side of *Wall* is composed of six panels of highly grained industrial type plywood framed and studded with two-by-fours. Three buttresses are screwed to the floor and support the wall at a point about 5 feet above the floor. Just above this joint square glass bricks are set in a row at eye level, one to a panel. These are held in place by two-by-fours which run horizontally across each panel and also run the height of the bricks on either side. Above this row and just below the upper studs run the two cords which supply electricity to the lamps. These take a curvilinear path under the top edge of the wall and, at the second and fourth stud, drop to the floor where they form a loose triangle which leads to the outlet.

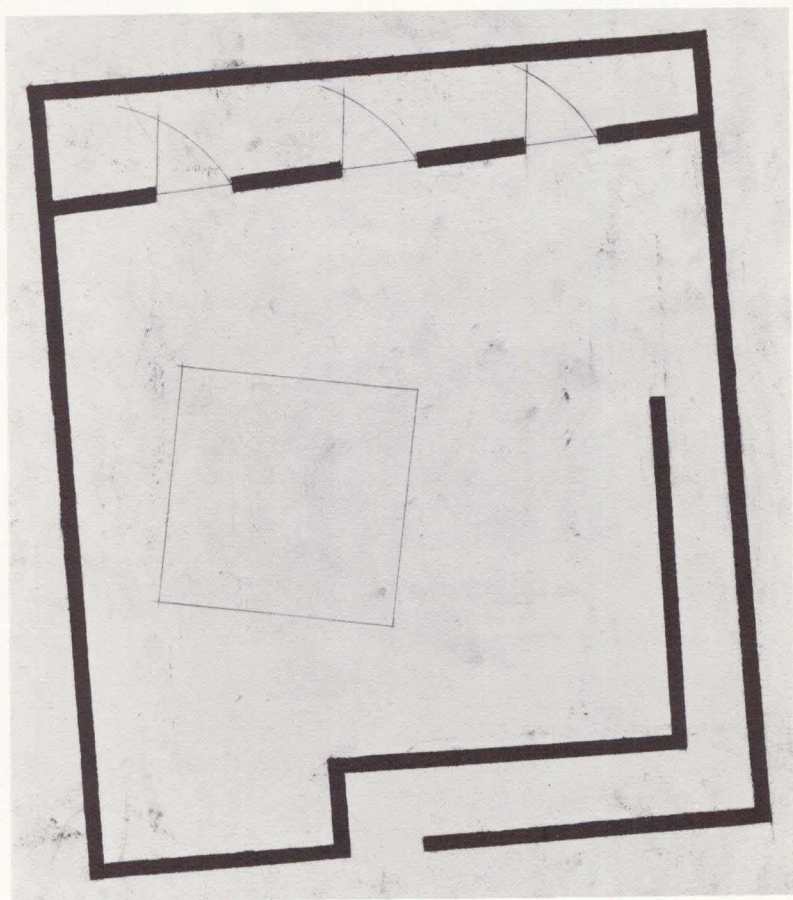
The front of each panel of *Wall* is completely sheathed in lead except for the glass bricks. The divisions between the lead facades become subtle and almost negligible. Above this grey expanse the industrial lamps rise up, curve, and drop to a point slightly above the bricks so that the uneven glossy surface of the glass reflects the light.

AARON STEELE



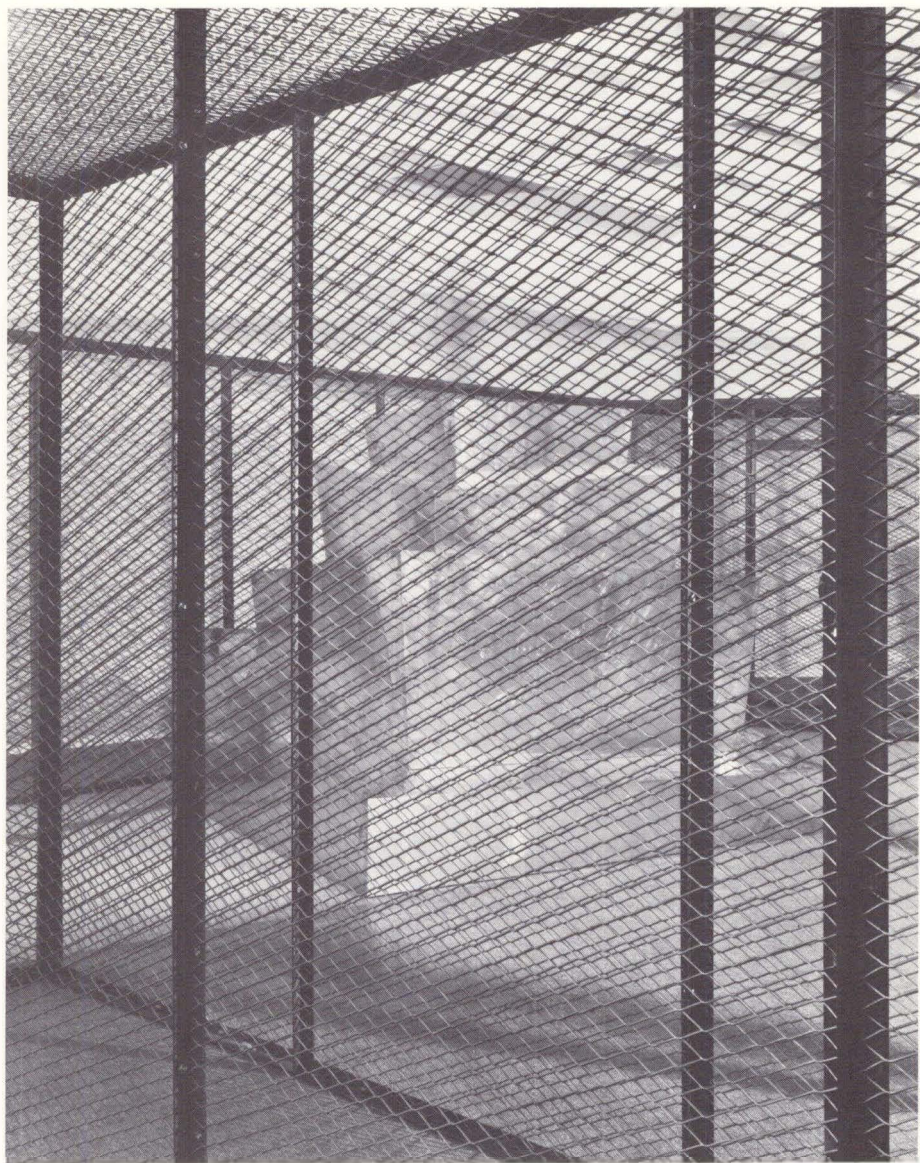


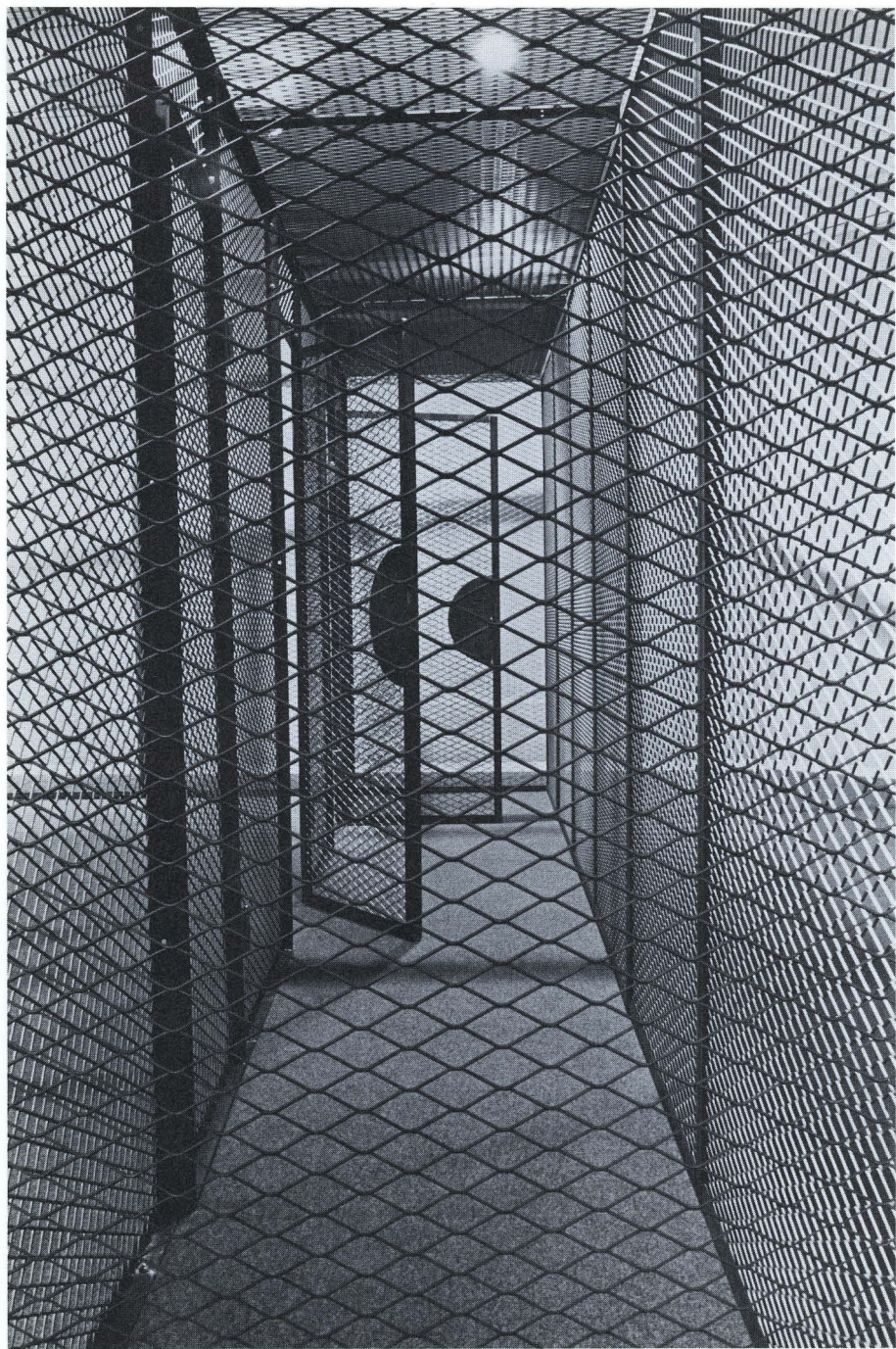
AXAXAXAS MLÖ



This environmental work, executed in 1982, is composed of an eccentrically tilted copper ziggurat within an enclosure of expanded steel fencing on a frame of metal channelling. The fence is made of fifty panels which typically measure $48\frac{3}{8} \times 96\frac{1}{2}$ inches locked together to form an enclosure that is 24 feet wide and 28 feet long. It is shown here as installed at the Vancouver Art Gallery Mise en Scene exhibition.







The viewer-participant enters through an open door (a panel with an opening 32 inches wide) and moves to the right through a corridor that constricts from 36 inches to 33 inches at the point where the viewer must turn to the left, exiting finally through a doorway 30 inches wide through which he gains access into the enclosure.

To the left of this exit sits the ziggurat. It rises in four tilted planes from a base measuring 93 inches square to the top steppe, 39 inches square. It is made of wood laminated with copper.

At the far end of the enclosure three hinged doors (again measuring 32 inches across) lead into a covered passageway. This corridor is as wide as a regular panel at the far left ($48\frac{3}{8}$ inches) but gradually diminishes as one moves to the right to a width of 36 inches. It is at this narrow end of the corridor that the height of the panels falls from $96\frac{1}{2}$ inches (at the entrance) to $84\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

A recording of barking dogs, taped in 1970 at Mortuary Temple of Ramesses II, Gournah, Egypt, echoes from speakers placed at the ceiling, to create an ambient sound for the environment.

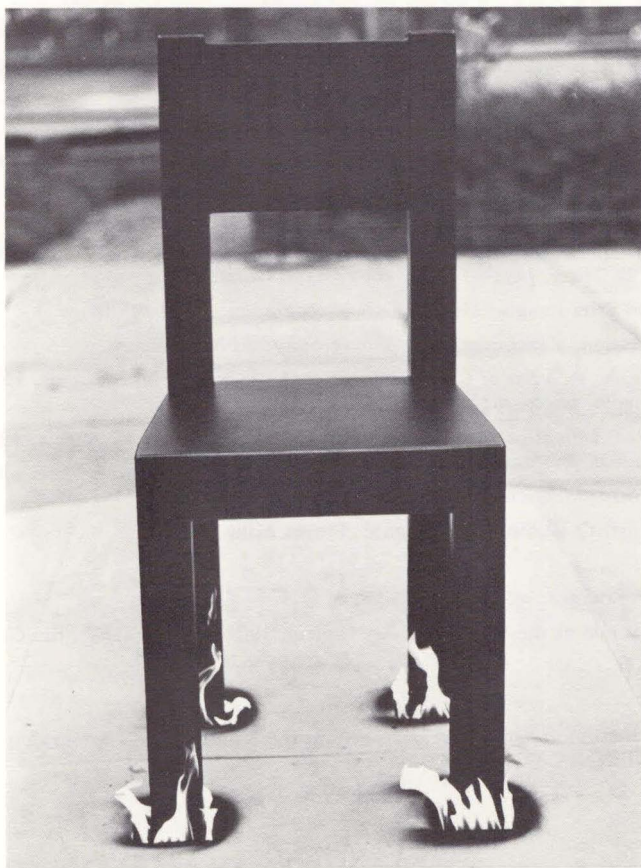
AARON STEELE



RUMINATIONS ON A SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES

This sculpture was installed in the Kunstverein's courtyard during the Künstler aus Kanada exhibition in Stuttgart, Germany, 1982. Four steel pillars rise 16 feet off a circular podium, 11 feet in diameter. The podium's top surface is sheathed in asbestos and its perimeter is embraced by a steel band. Three tilting rings of sheet copper over industrial styrofoam are bolted at varying intervals to the poles. Each measures 6½ feet in diameter. They are 2½ inches thick. Below this series of rings placed centrally on the podium between the poles is an oversized steel chair. The legs drop through the asbestos. They are surrounded by flames from four propane burners, fueled by a hidden tank.

AARON STEELE



IMAGES/

Untitled, 1967, mixed media. *photography*: Al McWilliams

Ode to Uncle Alex, 1972, mixed media. *photography*: Al McWilliams

Eggscape 1 (doors open), 1975, mixed media. *photography*: Ernest Meyer

Cactus Garden, 1976, mixed media. *photography*: Tod Greenaway

Moonscape for Mathew, 1977, mixed media. *photography*: Tod Greenaway

Suspended Animation in artist's studio, 1980-81, mixed media. *photography*: Trevor Mills

Wall in artist's studio, 1981, mixed media. *photography*: Trevor Mills

Detail *Axaxaxas mlö* at the Vancouver Art Gallery's *Mise en Scene* exhibition, 1982, mixed media. *photography*: Jim Gorman

Ibid.

Great Mosque of al-Mutawakki at Samarra, Iraq from *Islamic Architecture* by John D. Hoag. *photography* (copy): Jim Gorman

Still from Fritz Lang's "Metropolis." *photography*: Al McWilliams

Power Station, Vancouver, B.C. *photography*: Al McWilliams

Ruminations on a Set of Circumstances at the Künstlerverein, Stuttgart, 1983, mixed media. *photography*: Al McWilliams

Suspended Animation installed at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1981, mixed media. *photography*: Trevor Mills

Detail, *Suspended Animation*. *photography*: Trevor Mills

Wall in artist's studio. *photography*: Trevor Mills

Ibid.

Plan for *Axaxaxas mlö*, Al McWilliams.

Axaxaxas mlö at the Vancouver Art Gallery, 1982. *photography*: Jim Gorman

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ruminations on a Set of Circumstances at the Künstlerverein. *photography*: Al McWilliams

Ibid.