KEITH SONNIER
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March 12 – April 23, 2011

LEO CASTELLI

Barbara Bertozzi Castelli: I would like to start the conversation talking about a work you did in 1966 titled *Small File Study*. This work consists of a fingernail file that you covered with cotton thread. At a distance you just see a little black vertical line – the cotton is black or dark gray – and then as you get closer to it you see lines and lines of the thread that wraps around the file…

Keith Sonnier: The intricate wrapping in fact.

BBC: Yes the wrapping. But there is something so special about this work: you are immediately able to recognize that underneath all the wrapping there is a file, which is not something you built, but just a simple object that we all have in our houses. An object we use to take care of our nails. Is this the first piece that you did in the *File* series and how did you get the idea?

KS: Well, in order for this particular small work to have happened there were many other earlier investigations into different kinds of material and object combinations. This is one of the first pieces where the object is actually isolated

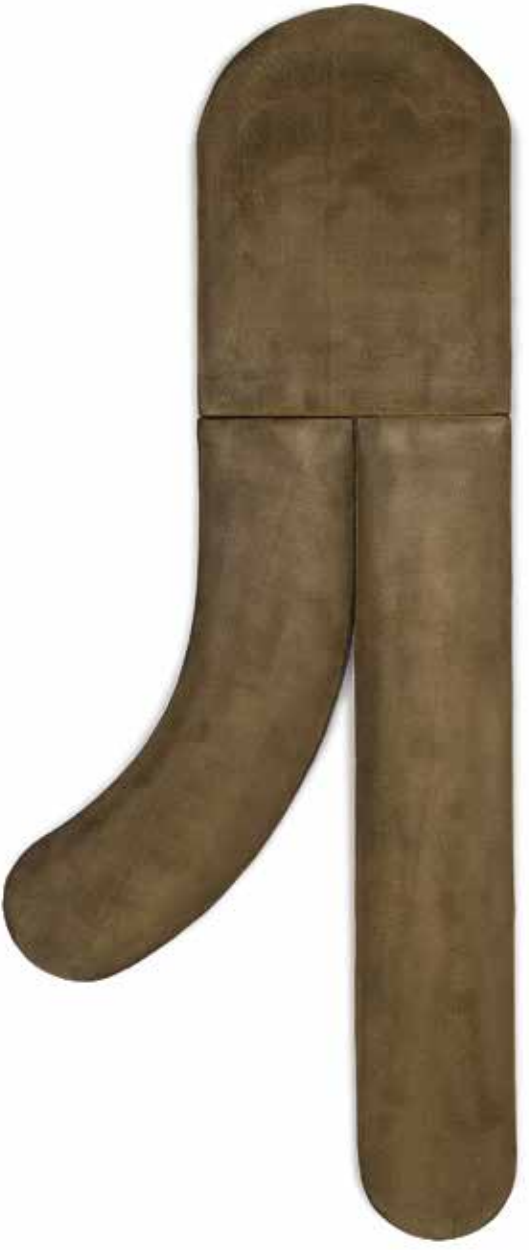
Small File Study, 1966
Sandpaper board, cotton thread, $6\frac{1}{2}$ x $\frac{3}{4}$ inches

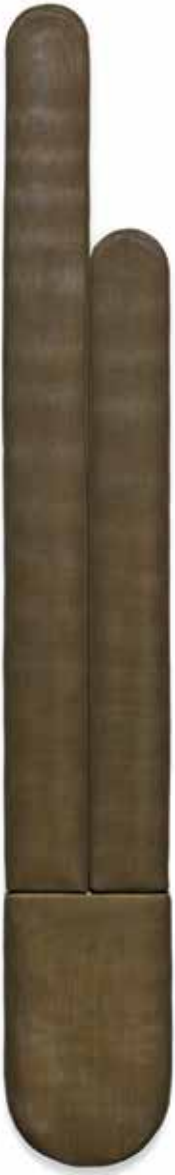
and not combined with anything else. The idea of isolating an object in this way made me think about redefining the shape by wrapping it, kind of like adding drawing on top of it, but essentially wrapping it like a mummy. Then other ways of developing the work for the *File* series came after that. Things were layered. Things were stuffed. Things were filled. Touch, as opposed to concept, was crucial.

BBC: It is interesting that you actually mentioned a mummy. There are two elements in the *File* series that got my attention. One is the physicality of the materials you used. You employed a large variety of materials – satin, brass, lead, screen, still wire – but they all have in common a very unique physicality. When you look at them – and, if you would be allowed to touch them – there is something quite unique to each one of the works.

KS: Well, it's a curious thing with this early series of work. Before I incorporated light and technology, I was really making work based on the five senses; on how things felt; how things smelled; how things could be heard. I was part of a new generation of sculptors who weren't using bronze and marble and the older sculptural techniques any more. We were interested in using new materials. When I approached these new materials, it was as though I was investigating the kinds of techniques that were common to everyday experience, like wrapping, stuffing, mixing or even upholstering. The construction of the *File* pieces could come from a childhood observation of my mother upholstering. She would redo the

Walking File, 1969/89
Brass screen on wood armature, 52 x 21 x 2 inches





couches in the living room and she would upholster them herself, and when you think about it, this was essentially about layering and padding and using different kinds of materials. So when, all of a sudden, I found myself taking this well known object, a fingernail file, and somehow mystifying it by imbuing it with a technique that transformed it into something else, it brought back these early memories.

BBC: The other element that I would like to point out is that in some *Files* one perceives a reference to a human presence. In *Walking File,* 1969/89 the title even suggests the image of a walking figure. There is a work title *Lay-In,* 1967 which consist of a long, rectangular shape laid on the floor and covered with a piece of cloth. I remember the first time I saw this piece, in its simplicity, I felt it could have been a body, lying down on the floor, it could have been a corpse.

KS: Yes, there's a funereal aspect to the covering, which quite frankly, is something I observed a lot in church as a young boy: how things were covered; the ecclesiastical sort of accouterments that had to go with, say, celebrating the mass or a funeral. I was around these objects. I was around objects like coffins, chalices and wine. I was around the manipulation of these objects. So, of course, the work gets imbued with this kind of influence. There's another element too that comes up, especially with *Lay-In,* 1967 and that's a sexual reference; it has a sexual auto-reference, because the material – pink satin – is very hot and loaded. I mean it's very much like the later neon work – it's a hot material.

Brass Finger File, 1969
Brass screen, aluminum, wood armature, 40 x 6 x 1 1/4 inches

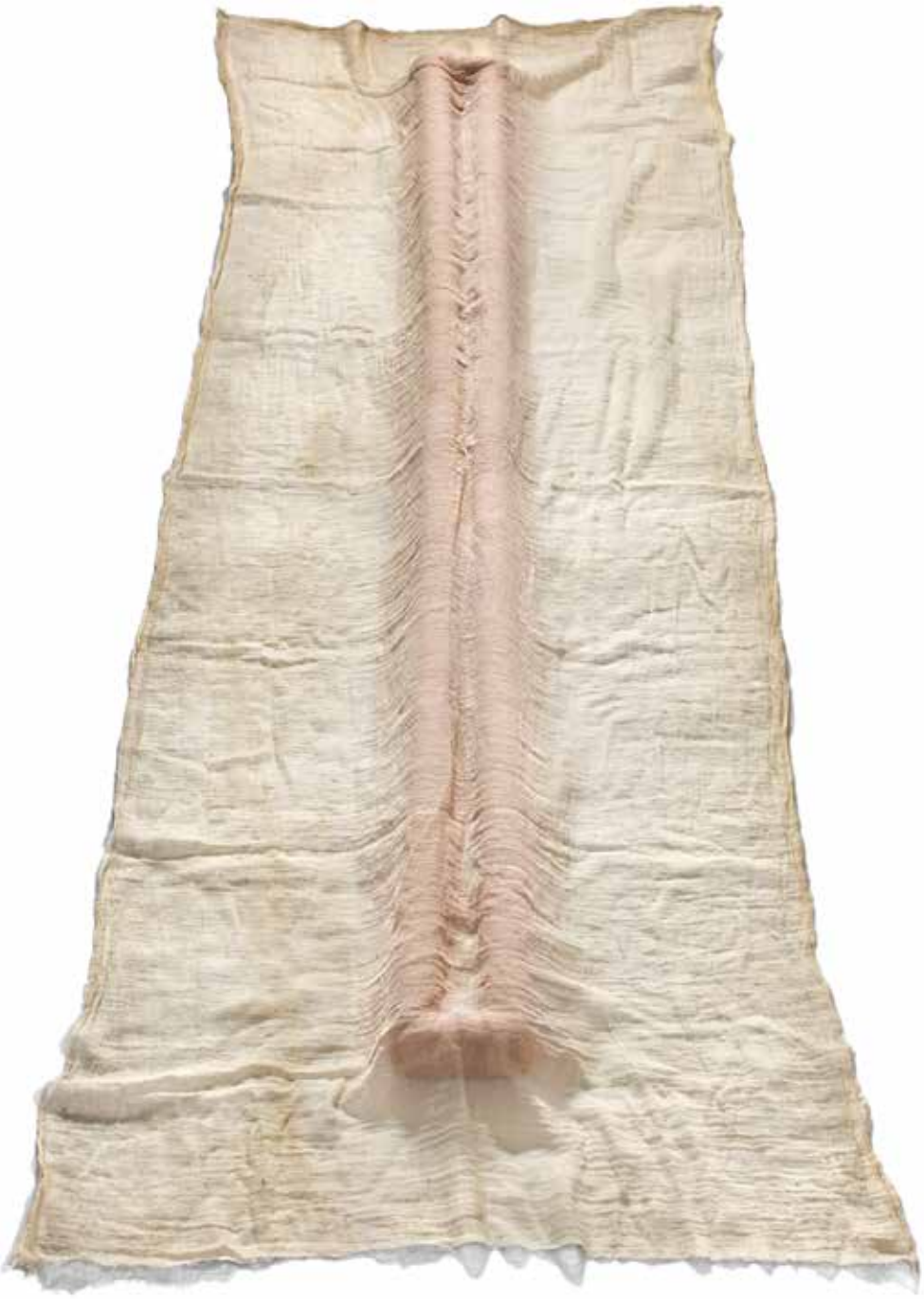
BBC: When you look at this work in the context of what was happening in the late 60s, during the post-Minimal movement, when you relate it to the work of artists like Serra, or Nauman, you see that their work is quite different than yours, and I believe one of the elements of difference is, indeed, this sexuality you are talking about. Your work is very bold and very delicate at the same time, these two elements are combined, whereas in the work by other artists the boldness prevails.

KS: There's definitely that, and somehow I move between those two elements. But what made the work really function well, was the strict, almost mathematical, placement of an object within the environment, relating it to the room and to the wall. These were the same concerns that other people were dealing with in their work too. But in my work, as in Nauman's, and even Barry LeVa's early work…we were moving away from Minimalism and taking the work in lots of different directions. What's interesting about this whole series of artists' works, is that they're all very different, and that's because they are imbued, I think, with all kinds of personal references no matter how minimalist, or not, they are. We were maybe making use of repetition but not in a minimalist way. We were using it in a more auto-erotic way.

BBC: I think that maybe an artist of that generation with whom you might have shared some affinity, is Eva Hesse.

KS: Well yes. I did know Eva of course and we were in some early shows together. Lucy Lippard curated *Eccentric Abstraction*

Lay In, 1967
Satin, cheesecloth, wood armature, 90 x 31 x 2 1/2 inches



which included both Eva, Louise Bourgeois and myself and several other artists at Fishbach Gallery in 1966. Our work had these sexual references, and we each went on in very different ways to express it. My early work was definitely very involved in that, and it was only as the work moved on to more technological interests, especially with the introduction of light, that the early focus began to change. It's curious that I'm going back to these early pieces now – a type of relic investigation.

BBC: As a matter of fact, when you were speaking about your mother earlier, I was reminded of some new pieces that I saw in the studio about one year ago. You mentioned you happened to find all this clothing that belonged to your mother, that she used to wear...

KS: Right (laughs). But it wasn't so much what she wore but rather the clothing that she hoarded during her bout of Alzheimer's.

BBC: And seeing them, prompted you to do these new pieces. Using clothes has been a central part of your work from the beginning.

KS: Well these early studies, like the string wrapping the file, involved the use of cloth and other kinds of transparent and translucent materials so that you could see one thing in front of another thing, in front of yet another. The basis of the *File* technology, in fact, was upholstery, and then translucency, because it was one skin on top of another skin.

BBC: Indeed, if we go back to the *Small File Study*, as you get close to the piece and the more you look at it, you almost feel like you would like to take the thread and unwrap it.

KS: Well there is that too, or that you physically want to touch the piece. I think the reason why the Museum of Modern Art doesn't want to show the *File* piece they own, which is a pink satin piece, is that they are afraid people are going to touch it.

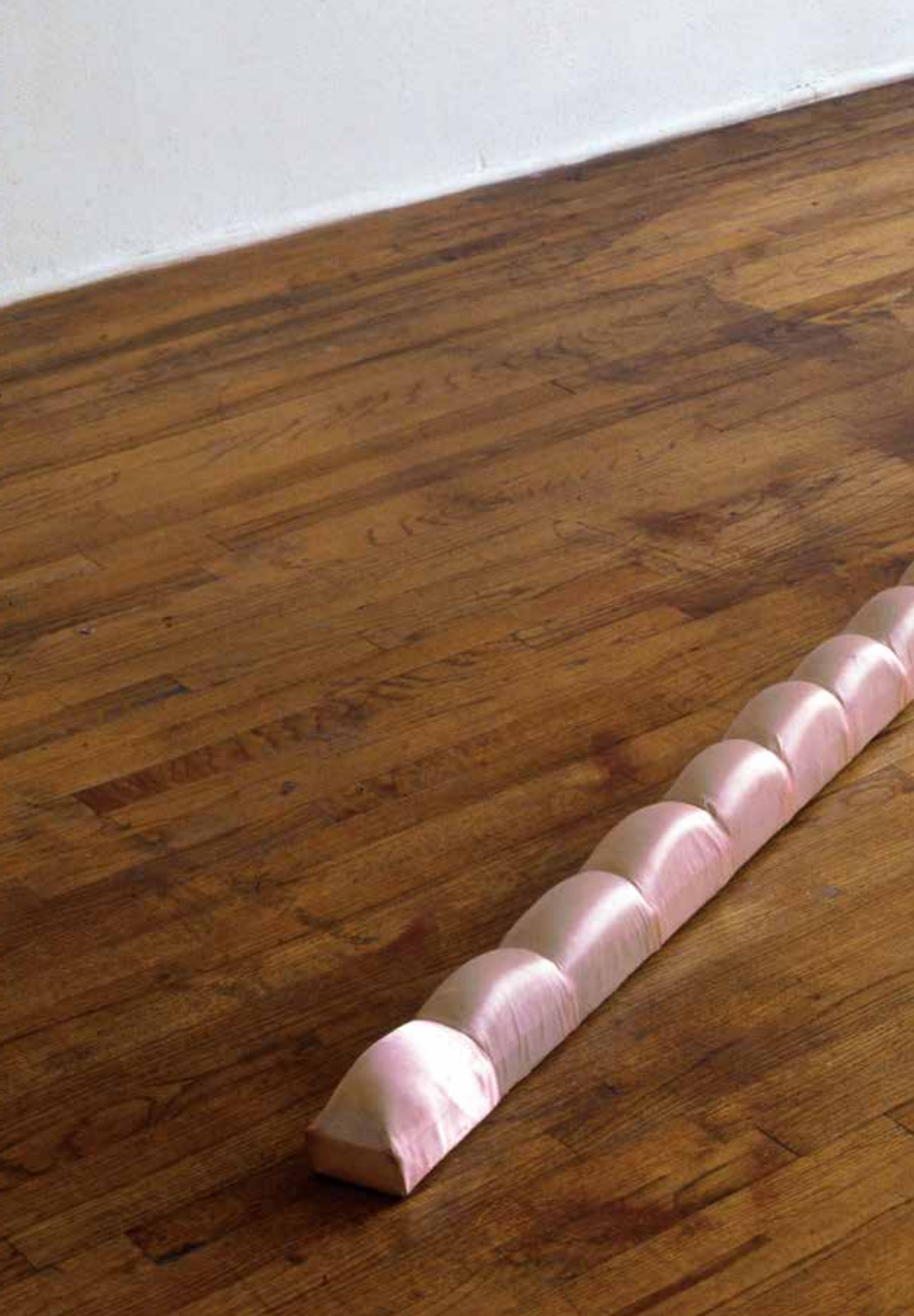
BBC: I have never seen in person the work in MoMA's collection, but I know that only looking at a photo of it makes me feel like I would like to touch it.

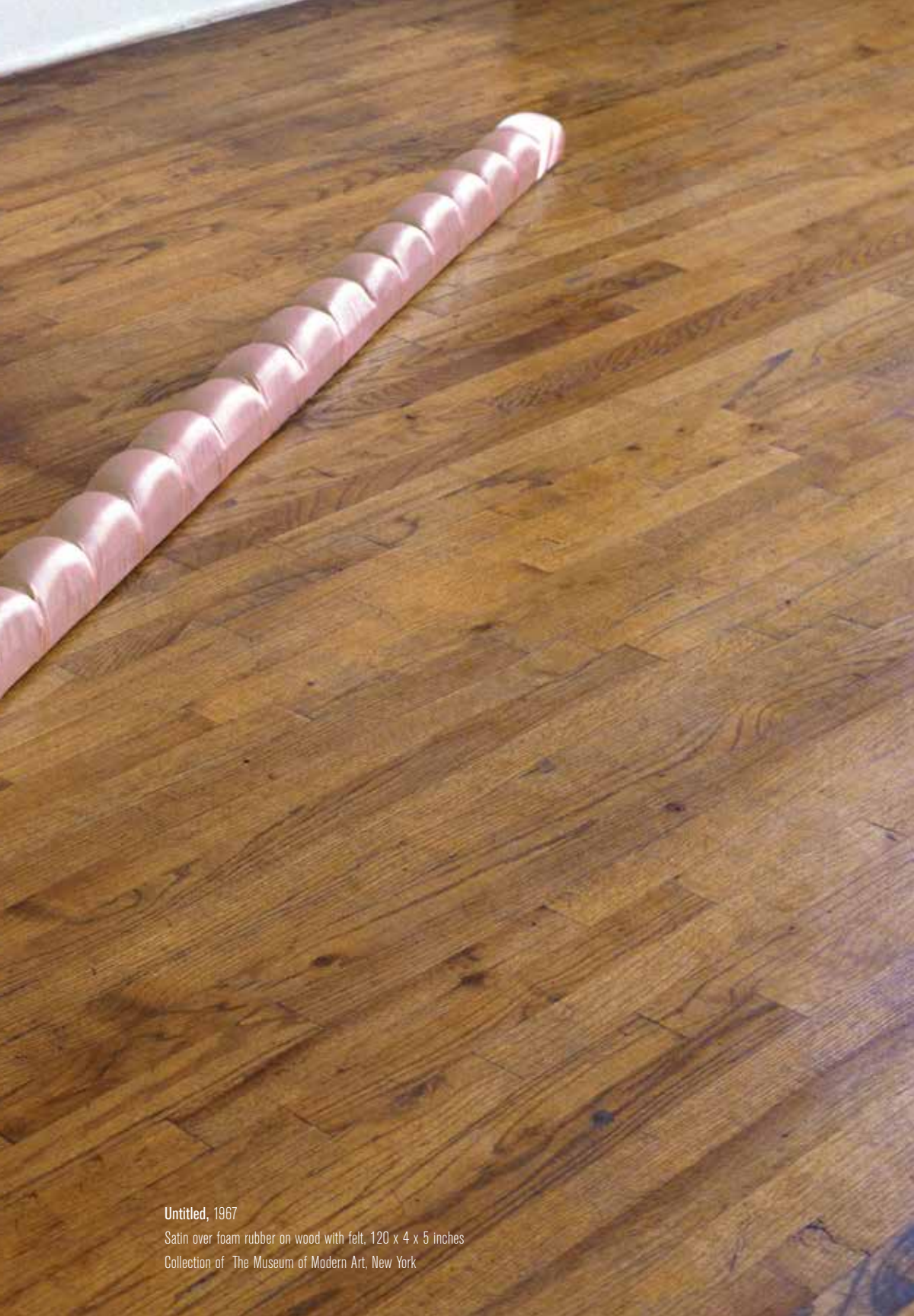
KS: Well it's very much like *Lay-In* – it's the same material.

BBC: But still, maybe it's because you see the image of this pink, puffy object, again another reference to the skin, to the body…

KS: Of course. Just like Nauman, there were many references to the body in my work, but not in the same way. That's what I'm saying, all of these artists addressed these issues in very different ways

BBC: In a way even Robert Morris' *Felt* pieces have a relation with the body, eventually. However, I think you said something really important when you mentioned the sexuality of your works. I think Bruce Nauman's interest is more directed to the psychological.





Untitled, 1967
Satin over foam rubber on wood with felt, 120 x 4 x 5 inches
Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York

KS: It's much more about the psychological aspect. It's the psychological drama of being in the space. It's about a mental exercise. And that's why I go back to the five senses: mine is about a sensual response.

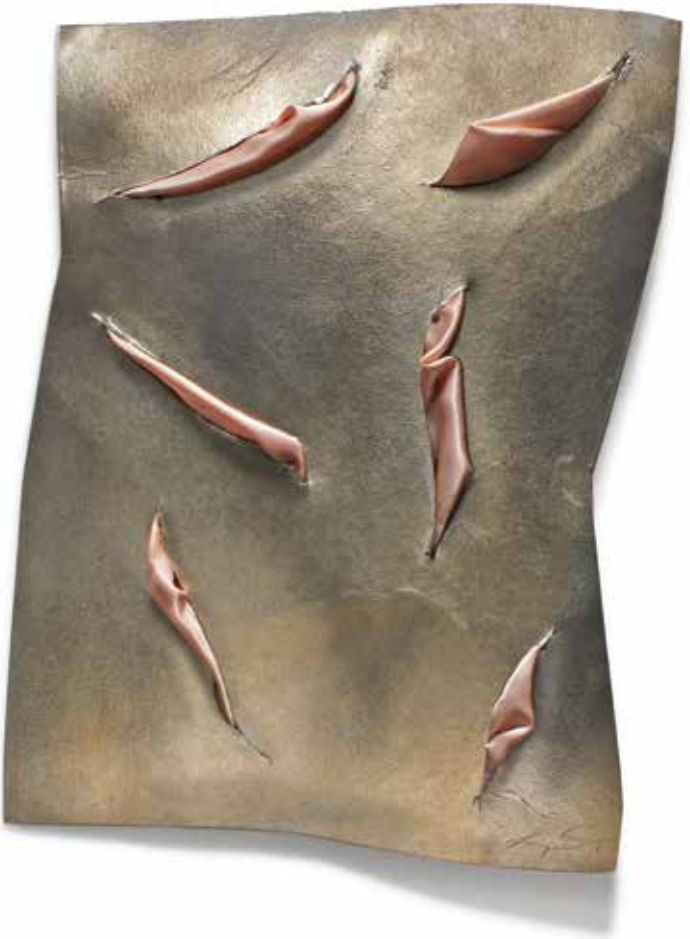
BBC: And actually, in a certain way, there is some kind of mystery in it.

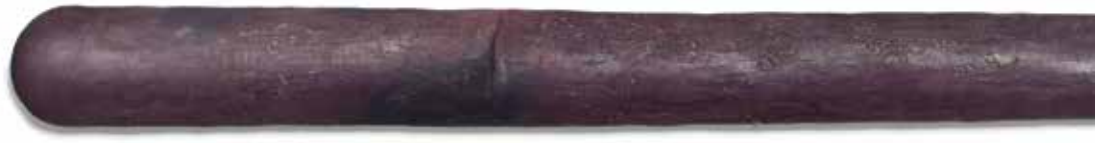
KS: And you see, I find my approach much freer, in a way, because it's related to those physical, sensual elements of life. For instance, I'm interested in food and cooking, and cooking is very close to art making, in that there is a combination of things, a chemistry, and a sensuality about it. People used to talk about Jasper Johns and they would say "Oh, the cuisine of the paint." And maybe it was in reference to the early wax paintings, but it might also have been about Jasper's need to cook, to be next to the flame, the warmth of the flame, which is a very sensual, primitive response, it goes back to one's real primal nature.

BBC: Last year I saw an interesting *File* piece in the house of a collector in Europe. It is made with a brass grid, and it has this gold-ish quality to it, but the piece is green. You look at it and you don't understand where the green comes from. You can't figure out if the brass is covering a piece of painted wood, or if there is a cloth underneath it, and you would like to touch the piece, open it up and unfold what is next.

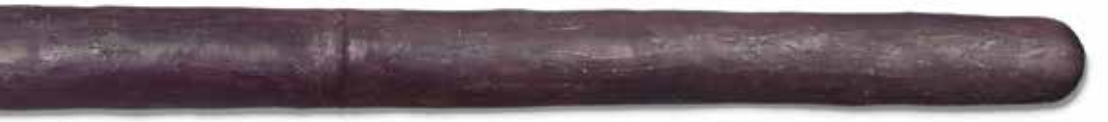
KS: Yes, right. And it's these kind of investigative acts that we began as children. I think this is the essence of art making,

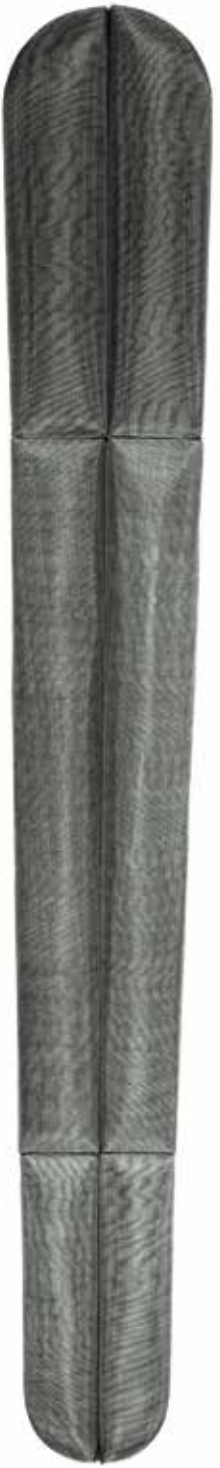
Pink Tuck, 1968
Cardboard, satin, spray paint, $10\frac{1}{8} \times 8\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{3}{4}$ inches





Purple File, 1966
Sculptmetal and paint on screen, wood armature, 6½ x 120 x 3 inches





especially for me, and I think for most children. It's about investigating how objects feel, how objects smell, how are objects to the touch.

BBC: In a way, when you look at the *Small File Study* we have been talking about, you could say that in '62, maybe, such an object could have been the subject of a Roy Lichtenstein black-and-white painting…

KS: Right (laughs).

BBC: Another artist from that generation stuffed things, animals: Bob Rauschenberg.

KS: And the bed.

BBC: Well yeah, in the bed the only thing that's missing is a body. And you think eventually what is life, and what is death, and what makes a body, and whether a stuffed body could exist forever even if the person is no longer there.

KS: Bob did own a mummy. And I think of Twombly too – you sense this in his paintings.

BBC: That's right. The *File* pieces, in addition to their wrapping and their layering of things, they also involve stuffing: several pieces – the work in MoMA's collection is one of them – are actually stuffed. So I guess that is another way of making these works…

File Coffin, 1969/89
Aluminum screen, 87 x 12 x 2 inches

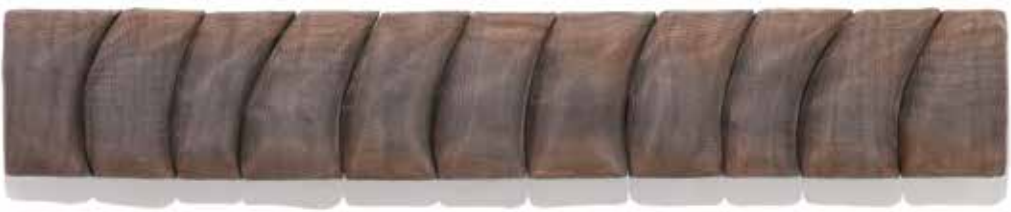
KS: Right. I remember my first art-making experiences although I never had art in school. I remember making things out of all kinds of found materials and natural materials and trying to imbue them with other kinds of meaning and association, just like all of a sudden a file becomes something else, or a mound of grass is covered and then it becomes something else.

BBC: So these are all interesting things. Now, another element that I think makes the work quite unique, together with the materials, the sexuality, and again if you compare it to the work of other artists of your generation, is – I think – that your objects are always very well-made. They are elegant. Even when you employ industrial materials, the work doesn't look as rough as most work by other post-Minimal artists.

KS: Well, it's curious. That does occur, but Don Judd's pieces, for example, are all very well made even in some of the works that are very geometric and that use extruded materials. The difference is that I'm using an extruded material like aluminum because its chemical nature is softer and it absorbs light differently. It conducts heat so differently from steel. There are all of these other chemical and psychological elements to material choices.

BBC: How did this work relate to what you did later on, when you started using neon? I can still see some of the early ideas being present in the neon pieces as well. The use of neon, and light, in your work, often reminded me again of the human body, of blood moving inside our body.

Curtain Study, 1964/68
Double stainless steel mesh over lead, $6\frac{1}{2}$ x 39 x $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches



KS: Interesting. In the pieces we showed recently at Castelli Gallery, the neon wrapped each light bulb like a drawing, as though it was wrapping around a body and it really looked like breasts being wrapped by light. Some of these early neon pieces had silver topped lightbulbs that suggested a kind of body armor or, as you mentioned, there was a sense that blood was moving, or an energy source was moving through the body. So what this approach does is it takes technology and humanizes it, and gives it this other context. That's what makes this work so different I think.

BBC: The work really represents a big departure point from what had been done until then.

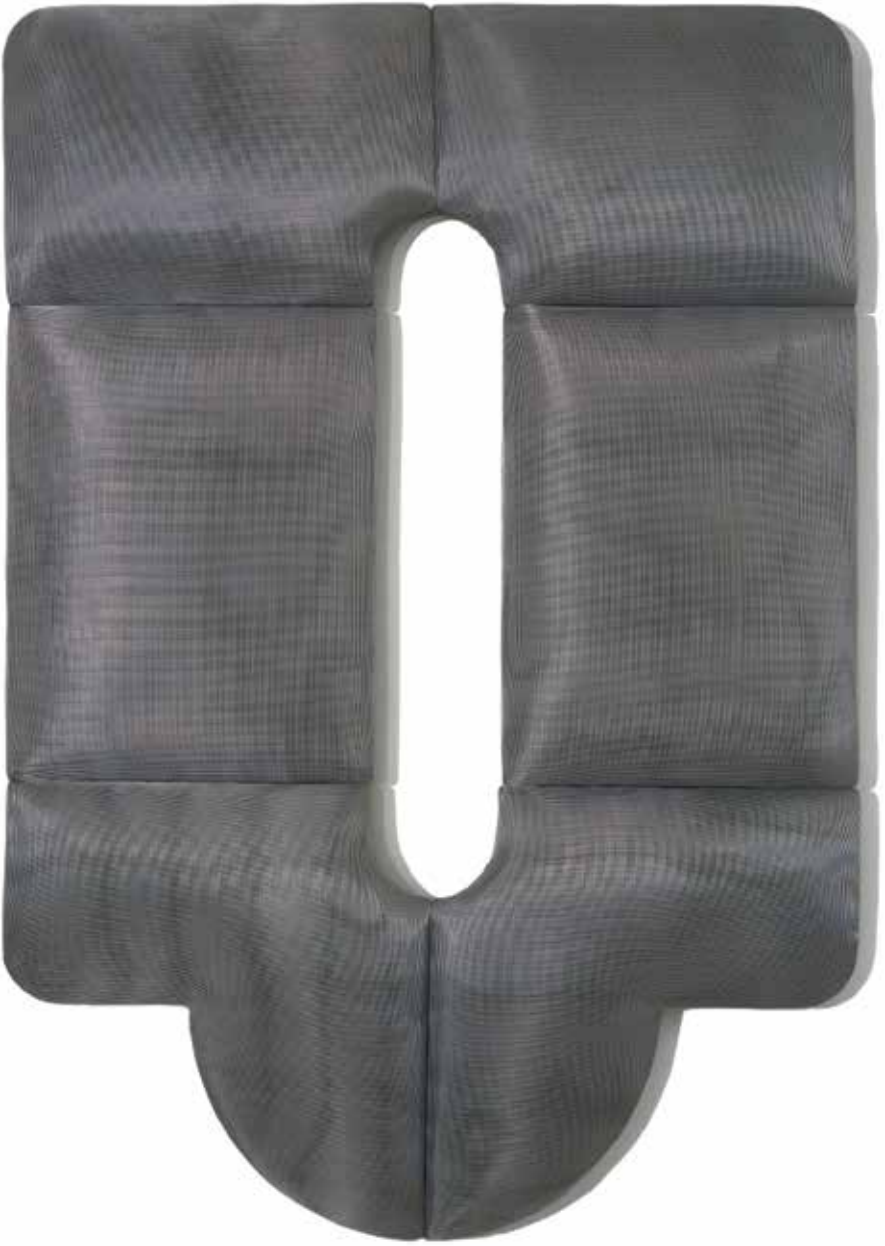
KS: You mean if you think of the context of painting and sculpture within architecture.

BBC: Yes, of course.

KS: Yes, granted, we could have arrived at those points in a philosophical way, but we broke the mold of the sculpture having to have a base and the canvas a frame, but then there were many ways to move beyond that. The sculptures from the *Neon Wrapping Neon* series, (1969) introduced the floor and the wall as architectural supports and so that dictated the shape and placed the piece within an architectural perspective.

BBC: Were the *File* works exhibited in the late '60s, was there ever a show dedicated only to these pieces?

Taff and Tuck I, 1968/89
Aluminum, wire mesh, wood armature, 51 x 39 x 4 3/4 inches



KS: Yes, there was a *File* series show at Jürgen Becker Gallery in Hamburg in 1990 but there were also some individual pieces from the series shown earlier than that with Rolf Ricke in Cologne.

BBC: How were they received?

KS: In those early years when they were shown, I was known for working in a variety of materials. So it wasn't a case of "oh it's not a light show so it's something else." I hadn't become synonymous with neon yet and the work was still in its early stages, so there wasn't much to compare it with really. But nowadays, when people look at work, especially young artists or even young critics, they're not aware of the breadth or the history of an artist's work. A critic looks at something and it's like "oh this artist has made this for the first time." They don't come to the work with any knowledge of the artist's body of work, and sometimes without any knowledge of art history. It's a Google mentality. More surface than depth.

BBC: Robert Morris, who has been one of the founding artists of the Minimal movement, after a couple years of doing minimal pieces, produced works that were quite distant from the basic ideas of Minimalism. When I asked him how this change in his work occurred, he told me that at a certain point he realized that Minimalism would bring you to a place where there was no way out, and that at a certain point you either kept doing the same work again and again, or you had to go back. For an artist like you, who belongs to the generation that followed the Minimal movement, is this correct?

KS: What becomes most important for me as a working artist, is that things have to remain interesting for me to be able to continue to work. Sustaining creative energy is difficult, and if one does the same thing over and over again, it can get rather rote, and one has to investigate within the limits of one's own form language, and one has to expand the language and make it more complex or less complex. I can totally understand Morris' moving away from Minimalism. He was already investigating other aspects of so-called Minimal art and he was never the most reductive minimalist artist anyway.

BBC: No, and you have never been a Minimal artist.

KS: No, but my education was. I grew up with this as sort of my painting and sculptural understanding of what contemporary art was. And for me, it was a great alternative to Abstract Expressionism, because that was all about a gestural interest in paint and color and free expression and quite frankly I was never drawn to that. I was much more drawn to how a minimalist work sat in space, and how it altered the use of color and architecture.

BBC: I guess with this we can finish the discussion.

KS: Yes, because we've come full circle. One thing that I never realized until we had this discussion today, is that the process involved in making the early *File* pieces really influenced my thinking about architecture and my later light work too. It allowed me an easier way to address the idea of skin

architecture, of the layering of one thing on top of another. This is how we base our vision of architecture now, it's not about mass. The *File* pieces were attempting to work with the idea of creating mass but doing so with layering, like the layering of skin or the wrapping of a mummy.

BBC: This actually brings up a memory of when I was a kid. We were playing in a city courtyard, there was an open wire and a kid got cut by high voltage, and his skin cut in a way such that you could clearly see four or five layers of skin. One doesn't normally realize that our skin has several layers.

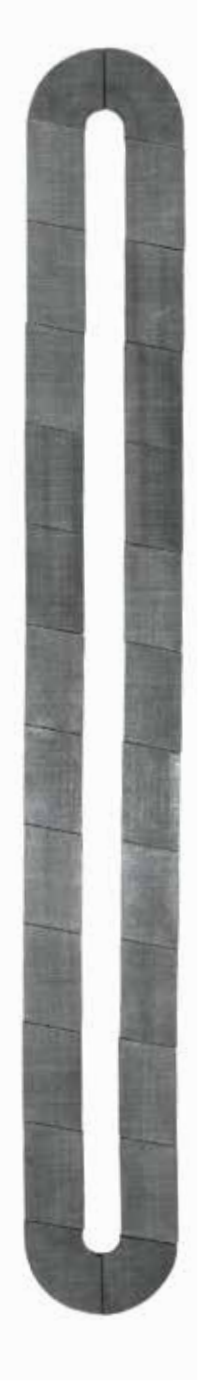
KS: Yes, I remember this too when my daughter Olympia was small. She was fascinated by painting her hand with Elmer's glue and then taking the skin off. And she would do this for hours and I'd say "Why?" and she'd say "I love to take it off" (laughs). And it does pull off like skin; it pulls it back into the body in a way. I mean even my early latex pieces were about these same kind of sensations.

BBC: Absolutely. In some of your latex pieces, like *Mustee,* 1968*,* or *Flocked Wall*, 1969 it's as though a piece of wall is being pulled off.

KS: Yes, to reveal the architectural support underneath.

New York, January 5, 2011

Loop File, 1969/89
Aluminum screen, wood armature, $65\frac{1}{2}$ x $8\frac{1}{4}$ x 2 inches



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Curtain Study, 1964/68
Double stainless steel mesh over lead
6 1/2 x 39 x 2 1/2 inches
Collection of Nicole Klagsbrun, New York

Untitled, 1965
Satin, thread, sawdust
11 x 3 1/2 x 1/2 inches
Collection of Nicole Klagsbrun, New York

Small File Study, 1966
Sandpaper board, cotton thread
6 1/2 x 3/4 inches

Purple File, 1966
Sculptmetal and paint on screen, wood armature
6 1/2 x 120 x 3 inches

File Study, 1966
Pencil on graph paper
11 x 8 1/2 inches

File Study, 1966
Pencil on graph paper
11 x 8 1/2 inches

Study for Floor Sculpture, 1966
Pencil on graph paper
11 x 8 1/2 inches

Lay In, 1967
Satin, cheesecloth, wood armature
90 x 31 x 2 1/2 inches

Pink Tuck, 1968
Cardboard, satin, spray paint
10 1/8 x 8 1/2 x 3/4 inches

Lead File, 1968
Lead over plywood
48 x 4 x 3/4 inches

Lead Belt File I, 1968
Lead, cotton rope, dyed cotton string
45 x 40 x 1 inch

Brass Finger File, 1969
Brass screen, aluminum, wood armature
40 x 6 x 1 1/4 inches

Loop File, 1969/89
Aluminum screen, wood armature
65 1/2 x 8 1/4 x 2 inches

The dimensions of the works in the present checklist reflect the way the works are shown in the illustrations. However, works can be installed either horizontally or vertically.

Lead File, 1968
Lead over plywood, 48 x 4 x 3/4 inches

Design by HHA design, Hannah Alderfer