

ART THAT JUST GOES 'PING' SANDBACK'S VIBRATION



The radical simplicity of Fred Sandback's work – installations created with just a ball of twine – have paradoxically led to a multiplicity of complex and often conflicting interpretations, assessed here by **David Raskin**.

Since his death in 2003, Fred Sandback has been honoured by survey exhibitions that have toured Europe and the United States. Prominent art historians have addressed his work: Thomas McEvilley suggested that its evocative content reaches to Kant's analysis of Beauty, while Yve-Alain Bois in contrast proposed that Sandback pressed the modernist deployment of space as a sculptural material to literal ends.¹ Even artists two generations younger have found this art important and relevant. Andrea Fraser, for one, felt the urge to pen an 18-page essay explaining why his art makes her cry, which is hardly the expected gambit from a performance artist who is so deeply engaged in stripping art's institutions bare.²

These reactions are present-day spasms of a decades-old debate. When Sandback was still a graduate student in the 1960s, critics and artists began to take up positions in what has proven a lasting battle between illusionism and illusion.³ One side valued modernist art that worked through illusionism, arguing that art itself requires the image to transcend its medium. The critic Michael Fried's famous contention about Jackson Pollock's paintings is a case-in-point: 'The materiality of [Pollock's] pigment', he wrote in 1965, 'is rendered sheerly visual'.⁴ The other side wanted a new art that did not engage in this game of pretend, with its metaphysical pretensions. It adhered instead to an ethics of literalism, in which the art material itself was never allowed to recede from our view. Donald Judd, for one, argued against Fried in 1967: 'The dripped paint in most of Pollock's painting is dripped paint. It's that sensation, completely immediate and specific, and nothing modifies it... It's not something else that alludes to dripped paint.'⁵ This difference between Fried's modernist illusionism and Judd's real illusion is one that Sandback himself in 1973 explained best of all. 'In no way', he wrote, 'is my work illusionistic. Illusionistic art refers you away from its factual existence toward something else. My work is full of

The works illustrating this article are by Fred Sandback (1943-2003).

1 Sandback installing at Dia:Beacon, New York, 2003. Photo: Nic Tenwiggenhorn, courtesy Dia Art Foundation, New York

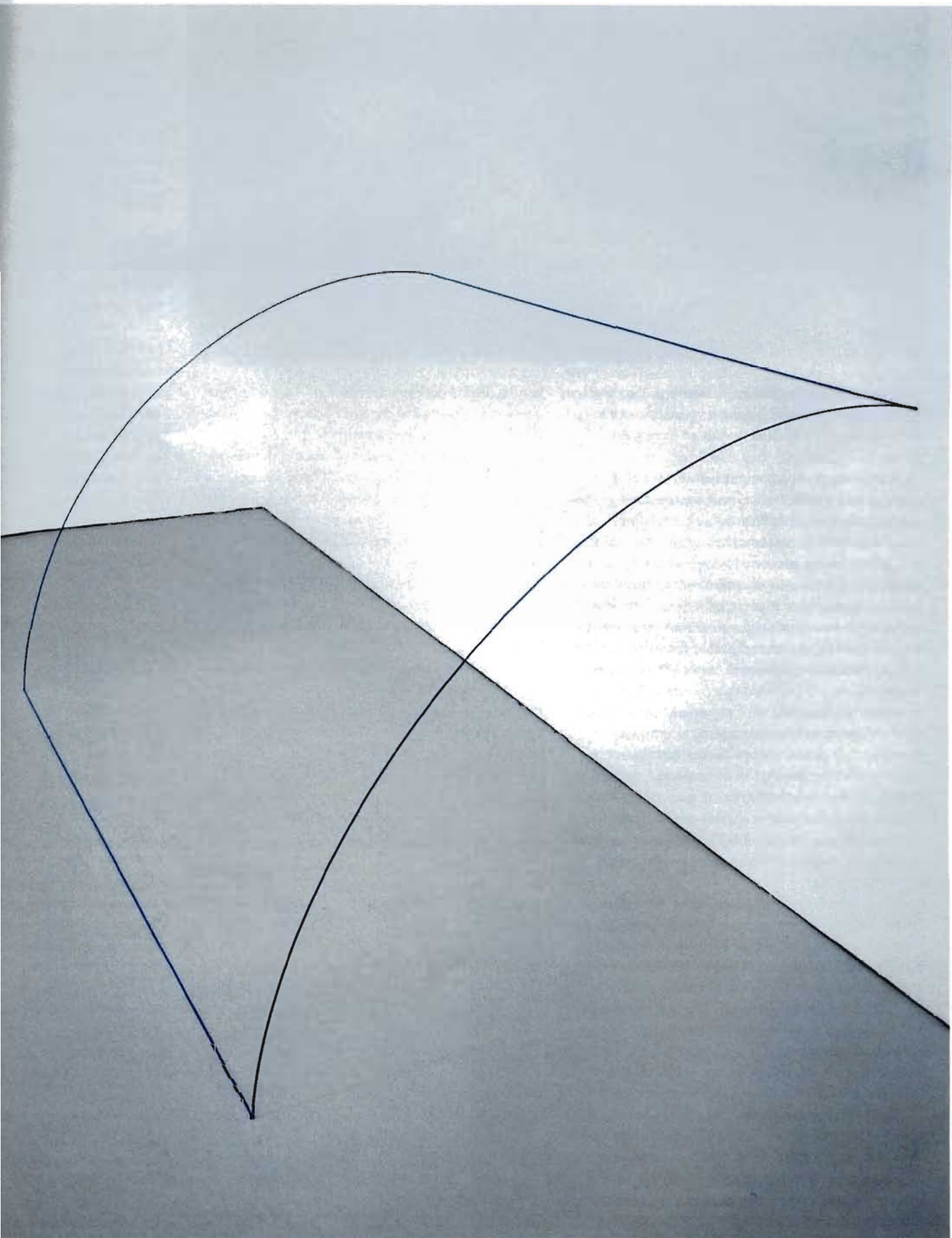
2 Untitled, 1968. Blue elastic cord and blue acrylic on steel, 116.5 x 182.9 x 116.5 cm. Estate of Fred Sandback, courtesy Zwirner & Wirth, New York. Photo: Cathy Carver, courtesy Zwirner & Wirth, New York

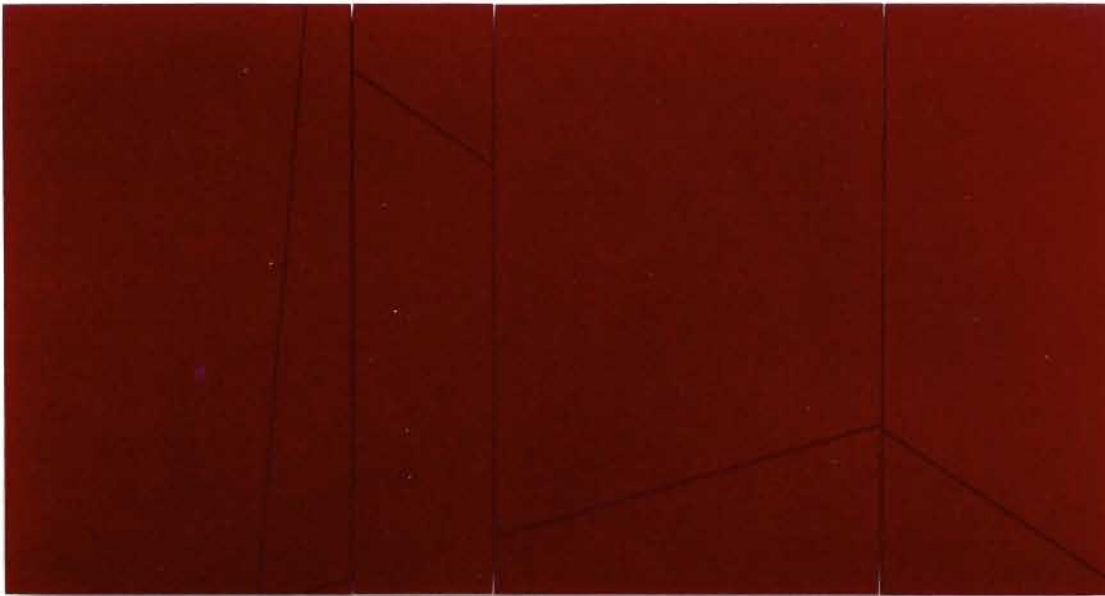
Versions of this essay accompanied the exhibition 'Fred Sandback: Sculpture and Related Works', Sioux City Art Center, Sioux City, April-July 2005 and University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laramie, 22 July-18 November 2006.

1 Thomas McEvilley, 'Fred Sandback: Nothing Outside Itself', in Friedemann Malsch and Christiane Meyer-Stoll (eds.), *Fred Sandback*, exh. cat., Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, 2005, p. 38. Yve-Alain Bois, 'A Drawing 'That is Habitable'', in *ibid.*, p. 57.

2 Andrea Fraser, 'Why Does Fred Sandback's Work Make Me Cry?', *Grey Room*, no. 22 (Winter, 2005), pp. 30-47.

3 Sandback earned a BA in philosophy from Yale in 1966. He earned his MFA, also from Yale, in 1969, studying with Lucas Samaras, Jack Tworkov, George Sugarman, George Kubler and others. Sandback also knew Donald Judd and Robert Morris, who were visiting artists at Yale in 1967.





3 Untitled (sculptural study, terracotta wall relief), 2003/2006. Acrylic paint on wood, 91.4 x 173.4 cm. Photo: Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy Zwirner & Wirth, New York

4 Untitled, c. 1986, pastel and pencil on vellum, 27.9 x 21.6 cm. Photo: Fred Sandback Estate

OPPOSITE PAGE

5 Untitled (First Construction), 1978. Black acrylic yarn, dimensions variable. Sammlung Verbund, Vienna. Installation view: Kunstmuseum, Liechtenstein. Photo: Thomas and Lorenz Cugini, Zurich

6 Untitled (Rendering of Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago), 1997. Pastel and pencil on paper, 56.8 x 76.2 cm. Estate of Fred Sandback, courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago. Photo: courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

illusions, but they don't refer to anything. Fact and illusion are equivalents. Trying to weed one out in favor of the other is dealing with an incomplete situation.⁶

As this suggests, a commitment to an art of material reality defies what most viewers have traditionally wanted from art. Every strand of Sandback's acrylic yarn is real; it is yarn and nothing but. When strung between ceiling and floor, it slices an art gallery into sections and makes us feel that we are standing before an invisible boundary. The sensation that our movement has been prearranged coincides with our perception that the string outlines a form. When another strand of yarn is anchored to the wall and floor, it configures a triangle in a way that gives the impression of volume without mass. When three strands span a corner, never quite meeting, they define a shape and create a location while preserving themselves as yarn-used-as-line (Fig. 7). Rather than letting us escape into the higher realms of our passions or dulling our living down to just brute physics, Sandback's working of material and volume in place presents our everyday world enlivened through tension.

It is precisely the heightened sense that tightness creates that most distinguishes Sandback's sculptures from minimal objects, postminimalist process pieces, and conceptual demonstrations of the 1960s and 1970s, even though this is the historical context to which his art rightfully belongs. His introduction of a dynamic into an otherwise inert reality gives us the conviction that the yarn is working. His yarn – our world – has the vitality of matter breathed alive. 'The acrylic yarn', Sandback said, 'just goes ping.'⁷

There is something that strikes me as beautifully, literally, moderate in the way Sandback's untitled art does not impose itself on us. There is no message, no polemic, no commentary. While still a graduate student, he and a friend named this quiet quality 'pedestrian space', a phrase for which he is widely

known. Pedestrian – in the sense of 'commonplace' – space is nothing like the fun-house place of most installation art. It is just a particular place at a particular moment, a version of normal matter-of-fact living clarified through art.⁸ This aesthetic distillation lets us pay attention to the basics of the experiences we continually have but seldom notice; we are usually too wrapped up in the actual distractions of living.

Sandback's unassuming art was by all accounts matched by an unassuming ego. The literature on him – which is vast, since he started exhibiting internationally in 1968, while still enrolled Yale – tells a consistent story of how he set about making art. Arriving at, for instance, the Tamayo Museum in Mexico City with preliminary sketches and a suitcase filled with pins and balls of yarn, he would work



4 Michael Fried, 'Three American Painters' (1965), in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago and London, 1998, pp. 224–25.

5 Donald Judd, 'Jackson Pollock' (1967), in Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959–1975: Gallery Reviews, Book Reviews, Articles, Letters to the Editor, Reports, Statements, Complaints*, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and New York, 1975, p. 195.

6 FLS [Fred Sandback], 'Notes' (1973), in *74 Front Street: The Fred Sandback Museum*, New York, 1982, p. 4.

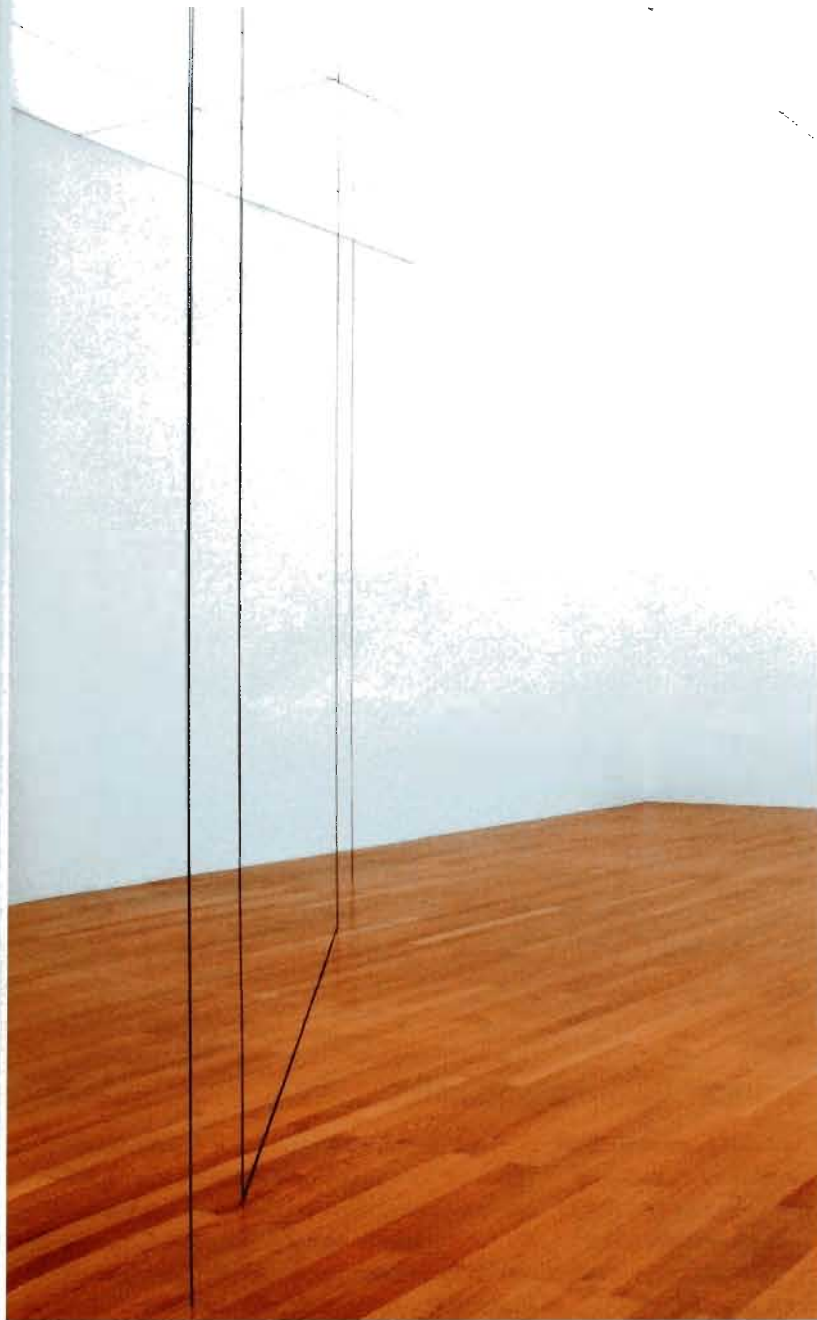
7 Fred Sandback, in Michael Goven, Marianne Stockebrand and Gianfranco Verna, 'Conversation with Fred Sandback', *Chimati Foundation Newsletter*, vol. VII, October 2002, p. 32. Emphasis in the original.

8 Fred Sandback, 'Remarks on My Sculpture 1966–1986', in *Fred Sandback 1966–1986*, exh. cat., Galerie Fred Jahn, Munich, 1986, p. 13.

mathematical formulas, precise measurements and geometry for impersonal form (instead of, as is the case here, geometry as result: geometry is a function of his process – the tensing of string – and so subject to the laws of physics). That his art's contingency is achieved by presenting geometric shape as an axiom also sets it apart from most post-minimal art, which used the unstructured nature of raw materials (such as hung felt, poured latex or splashed lead) to undermine and de-structure form.

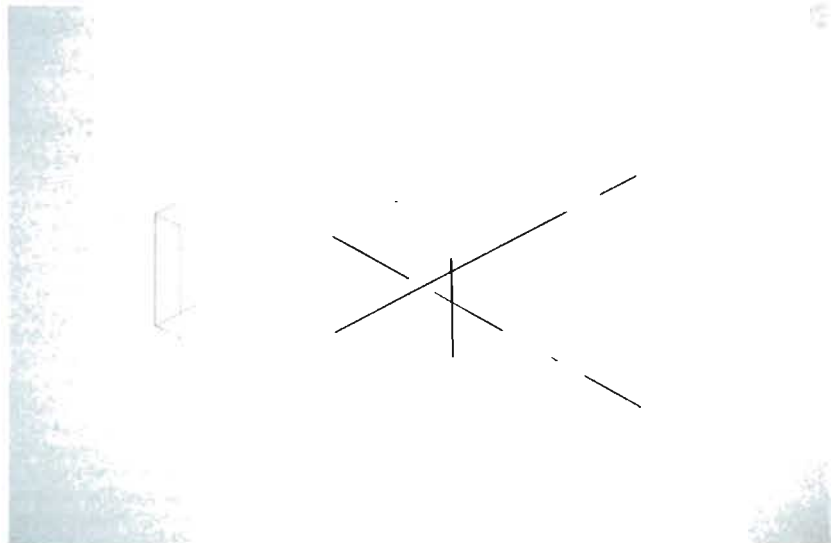
The sculptures are born in Sandback's dynamic experience, which mixes his personal history with each new physical encounter. Once installed, however, the works pass from this context to viewers' memories, quietly resonating in this new location. This transfer was what he called art's 'two-part being in a place', the vital quality of its contextual specificity resonating beyond one location, beyond Sandback himself.¹¹ In further explaining this public aspect of his art's privacy – its transposition of his past to the viewer's mind – Sandback said, "The string is a contradiction."¹² For as long as the medium remained anchored in a museum or gallery, the art was only half real, only one part in place and artificially truncated.

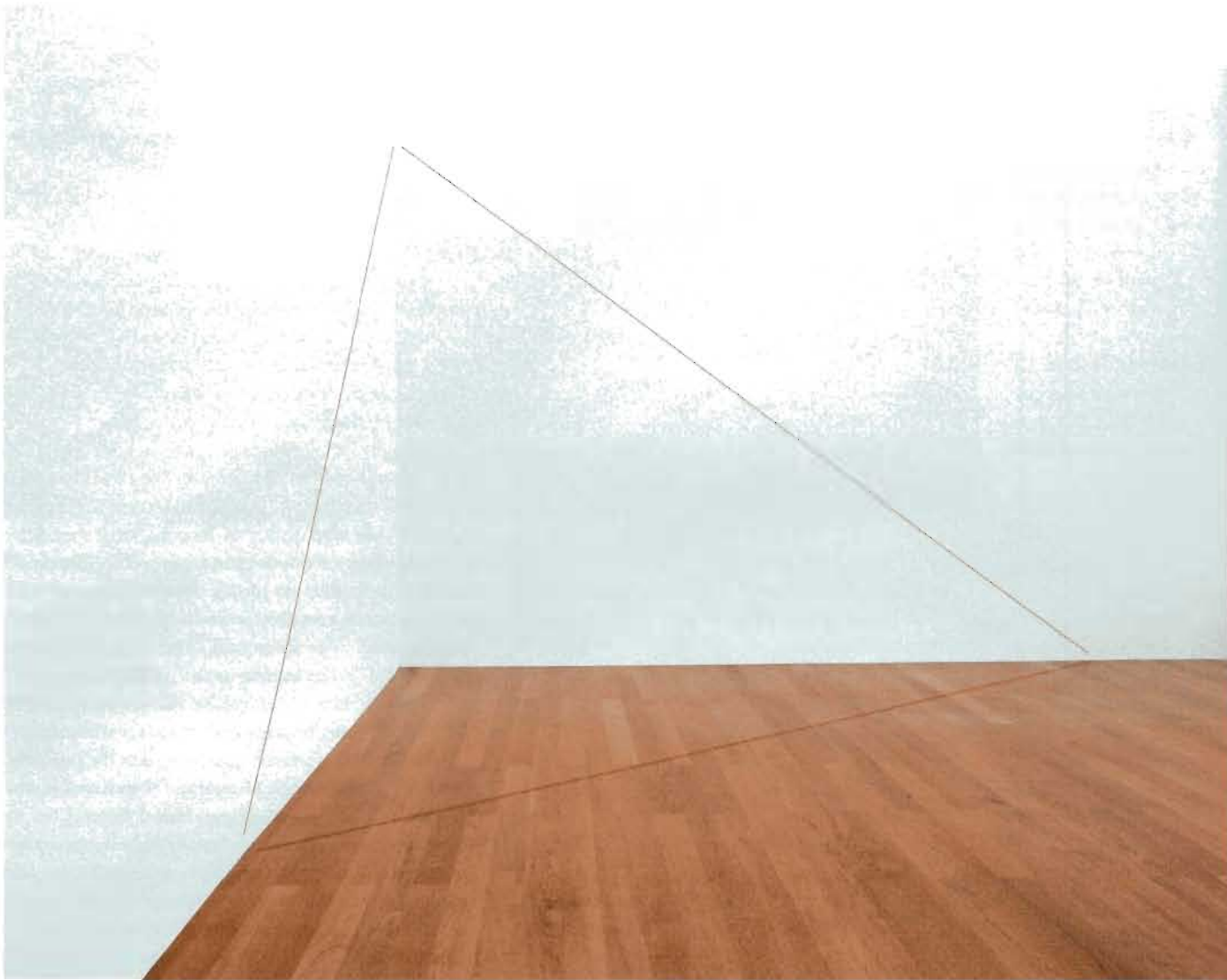
Such a freezing in time and space was the problem with the Fred Sandback Museum in Winchendon, Massachusetts, which was open from 1981 to 1996, when Sandback decided to close it. Although initially enthusiastic about the idea of a long-term display, he began to feel sceptical about any potential permanence. '[F]orever', he said, 'It's just too long.'¹³ What 'forever' caused to be lost was the intuitive core that keeps art, like people, fresh. Without an equal tension between ourselves and our environment, it is just too easy to fall into the paralysing trap of applying set responses to new situations, of stripping them of their uniqueness and the world of its vigour. Rather than striking a balance between ourselves and our environment, figure and ground, material and



intuitively, using the gallery space to build his lines much as a painter works with a blank canvas or a dancer a thrust stage (in all three cases the parameters are preset, but not the expressive results). After the exhibition, the string went into the wastebasket. As he told one interviewer, "There is not much holy about a ball of yarn. Throw it out. Get a new one."⁹ This relatively unplanned process transformed the initial sketches into unique yet parallel works of art. Since his sculptures have variable dimensions, he explored formats invented earlier in new and renewed configurations as a function of venue, something he thought gave the pieces 'a particular vibrancy or actuality'.¹⁰

The intuitive process further demonstrates Sandback's distance from the more quantifiable variants of reductive art, which depended on





effect, one pole of these metonymical dichotomies receives too much emphasis and becomes reified.

In his commitment to freshness, Sandback chose the music score as the most apt analogy for his artistic values, since the symphony is born anew in every performance.¹⁴ In 1979, for example, he designed a large untitled vertical-and-floor sculpture in two parts (a 'U' plus an 'I') for the 73rd American

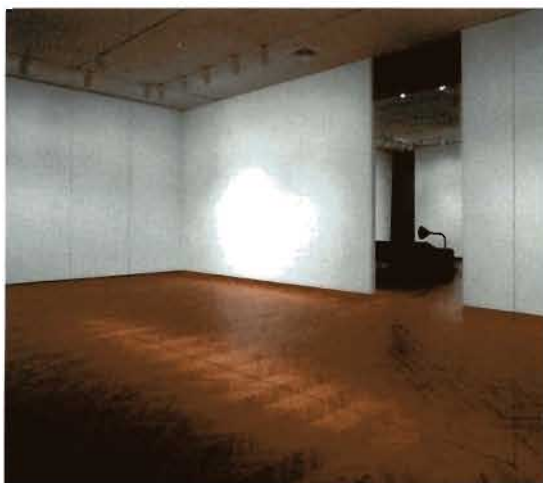
7 **Untitled (Cornered Triangle), 1997.** Rust-brown acrylic yarn. Ceiling height 381 x 381 cm. Estate of Fred Sandback, courtesy Annemarie Verna Galerie, Zürich. Photo: Thomas & Lorenz Cugini, Zurich

8 **Untitled, 1979.** Black acrylic yarn, 457.2 x 1704.3 cm (last installation). The Art Institute of Chicago

⁹ Fred Sandback, quoted in Kimberly Davenport, 'Impossible Liberties: Contemporary Artists on the Life of Their Work over Time', *Art Journal*, vol. LV, no. 2 (Summer, 1995), p. 40.
¹⁰ Fred Sandback, quoted in Lynne Cooke, 'A Eulogy for Fred Sandback', *Chinati Foundation Newsletter*, vol. VIII, October 2003, p. 51.

Exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. He installed it on the diagonal in the middle of a gallery. When the museum purchased the piece in 2001, he explained that it could also be attached to one wall and extend perpendicularly into the gallery. In a recent installation (Fig. 8), the curator placed it parallel to two walls in order to emphasise its relational characteristics. A Jasper Johns painting with a U-shaped piece of string and two hinged boards hangs on the first wall in the gallery (*Near the Lagoon*, 2002-2003); the second wall is interrupted by a U-shaped doorway into the next gallery. With each option, Sandback's sculpture acquires the promise of a unique existence: the 1979 installation created the impression of two vertical planes; the proposed perpendicular version incorporates an actual wall; and the curator's installation creates four planes, although two of them feel less substantial than the others, seeming more like passageways than walls.

Spare art brings out all sorts of interpretations and Sandback's sculptures are no exception. When works of art are little beyond yarn that cuts galleries, contours form and constructs space, critics find





that they can say just about anything; they all too often strike the very imbalance that Sandback stood against. For some, his sculptures are about the possibility of art reduced to an essence as creative gesture, dematerialised idea, quantifiable system, or Value. For others, his art is about various politicised relationships among the sculpture, viewer, and gallery. These themes are the grand subjects that have captivated an art world defined by and in relation to minimalism, postminimalism and conceptual art.

While Sandback was immersed in these intramural issues, a friend of his recalled that 'he was more interested in music than in art criticism, in archery, in philosophy, in the north. Particularly music: all kinds from blue grass to classic to ethnic to new composers. There were thousands of records and discs and tapes in his studio, and music was always playing. He made long bows, and there was a target in the studio in New York as well as an outdoor one up in New Hampshire.' This sense of his personal life is part of Sandback's factual existence, which, like the works themselves, helps us discover what is special in an individual project that is connected to

9 Untitled, 1983.

Installation view: Neue Galerie, Graz, 2005.

Photo: Fred Sandback Estate

11 Fred Sandback, 'Notes', in Hermann Kern, ed., *Fred Sandback*, exh. cat., Kunstraum München, 1975, p. 12.

12 Fred Sandback, in Goven, Stockebrand and Verna, op. cit., p. 31.

13 Ibid, p. 30.

14 Fred Sandback, quoted in Davenport, op. cit., p. 52.

15 Sandback's statements, his interests in philosophy and archery, and the era in which he was a student suggest that the philosopher Henri Bergson's ideas might be relevant to his project, and in particular, Bergson's interest in Zeno's paradox. For related reasons, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's late discussion in *The Visible and the Invisible of Being*, (English trans., Evanston, 1968) as an 'ontological vibration' is equally suggestive. These remarks are, however, speculations on my part, and not directly supported by Sandback's published comments.

16 Fred Sandback, quoted in Davenport, op. cit., p. 51

broader cultural trends.

Yarn sculptures, longbows, fiddles and violins all have vibrato in common, the energy from a tensed string set in motion. And vibrato was what Sandback was trying for with his art, trying to explain through such formulations as 'two-part being in a place' and 'string [as] contradiction'. Although we might call this real effect of string an illusion, no matter how you explain the experience, there is no illusionism, no deception, just the reverberation of being.¹⁵

Following Sandback's death, curators and the Fred Sandback Estate have continued the artist's practice of reimagining the works with each new installation and exhibition. This solution to Sandback's absence feels somehow different now that it isn't one of convenience or practicality; but it is one to which the artist himself spoke: 'A curator will re-create a piece because she wants to, and it is this will that drives the re-creation, finally, not the remnants of my will.'¹⁶

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