
The Box Transformed

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

February 15–April 25, 1985

The Box Transformed



Joseph Cornell
Rose Castle, 1945
 Glass, mirror, and wood, 11½ x 14⅞ x 4"
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
 Bequest of Kay Sage Tanguy 64.51



Louise Nevelson
Night-Focus-Dawn, 1969
 Painted wood, 102 x 117 x 14"
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
 Gift of Howard and Jean Lipman 69.73

For many artists of the past fifty years, the box has been both a functional form and an independent, sculptural entity. Among American artists attracted to Surrealism, the secluded interior of boxes became ideal enclosures for assemblages evoking fantastic worlds. In their work, the form takes on narrative connotations. For other, more abstract, artists the box, often a simple cube, is of central importance as a non-narrative, non-hierarchical, and non-illusionistic vehicle. In both cases, the box lends itself to associative meanings, textural elaborations, and serial repetitions.

Joseph Cornell, who admired nineteenth-century French Symbolist art and Max Ernst's Surrealist collages, assembled a rich variety of panoramic universes within his small glass-enclosed boxes. In these fanciful tableaux, which resemble theatrical stage sets, Cornell evokes an imaginary past. The eerie atmosphere of *Rose Castle* (1945) was created by sprinkling silvery glitter over the landscape and using mirrors, both as the castle's windows and as background. *Hôtel du Nord* (c. 1953), a homage to Hans Christian Andersen, who lived in a Copenhagen hotel of the same name, uses a number of antique constellation maps and symbols, a small white column, and patined paint to conjure up a place Cornell himself longed to know.

Louise Nevelson's wall sculpture is often made up of cellular cubic units containing found odd wooden fragments, which together build a surprisingly lyrical composition. The cube is the simple structure or building block which allows her to elaborately order space and form into a

quasi-architectural whole. The viewer becomes engulfed by the variety of textural surfaces, the juxtapositions of irregular shapes, and the overall monumentality. By painting each assemblage a single color, often black, Nevelson unifies its imagery even while obscuring the original identity of the found objects. They seem familiar; yet composed in serialized geometric formats, they become unidentifiable.

Lucas Samaras, like Cornell, and to some extent like Nevelson, explores a dream-world. In early pieces such as *Untitled Box No. 3* (1963), he worked on an intimate scale to reveal personal experiences. Using nails, razor blades, ropes, and yarn, he suggests a fetishistic world whose iconography recalls his childhood in Greece. Whereas *Untitled Box No. 3* is characterized by a sense of anxiety and violence, much of his work in the later 1960s, such as *Box #56* (1966), is colorful and decorative—reminiscent of bright and dazzling Greek toys and folk costumes. Samaras' boxes, in their focus on memories and dream imagery, follow the European Surrealist tradition.

The work of Eva Hesse often assumed serial and orthodox Minimalist formats, but it also achieved an unusual, organic feeling through the use of such perishable materials as fiberglass, latex, and rubber. In her work, chaos confronts order, and simple forms are fraught with emotional intensity. In *Accession II* (1967), the basic cube form is rigorous, hard, and angular. But its interior bristles with short flexible rubber tubing that gives off tactile sensations. Her friend and mentor, artist Sol LeWitt, pointed out that its contrasts offer the best of both possible worlds.

Checklist

All dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Richard Artschwager (b. 1923)

Description of Table, 1964

Formica, 26 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 32 x 32

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc. 66.48

Construction with Indentation, 1966

Wood with melamine laminate,
59 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 48 x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Philip Johnson 72.32

Hair Box, 1969

Rubberized hair, 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$
Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Hair Box 3, 1969

Rubberized hair, 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 17 $\frac{1}{2}$
Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

Joseph Cornell (1903–1972)

Rose Castle, 1945

Glass, mirror, paper, and wood,
11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 14 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 4

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Bequest of Kay Sage Tanguy 64.51

Hôtel du Nord, c. 1953

Glass, paper, metal, and wood,
19 x 13 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase 57.6

Eva Hesse (1936–1970)

Accession II, 1967

Galvanized steel and rubber tubing,
30 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 30 $\frac{3}{4}$

The Detroit Institute of Arts; Founders Society Purchase, Friends of Modern Art Fund and Miscellaneous Gifts Fund

Inside I, 1967

Paint, wood, papier-mâché, wire, and acrylic,
12 x 12 x 12

Xavier Fourcade, Inc., New York

Inside II, 1967

Paint, wood, papier-mâché, card, weights, and acrylic, 5 x 7 x 7

Xavier Fourcade, Inc., New York

Sans II, 1968

Fiberglass, 38 x 170 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ overall

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the Albert A. List Family and Dr. and Mrs. Lester J. Honig 69.105

Donald Judd (b. 1928)

Untitled, 1978

Plywood, 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 161 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ overall
Collection of Loretta Vinciarelli

Sol LeWitt (b. 1928)

B9 A9 (from Serial Project #1), 1966–68

Baked enamel on aluminum, 19 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 32 x 57
Private collection

Louise Nevelson (b. 1899)

Large Cryptic II, 1969

Painted wood, 14 x 14 x 11

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of The Pace Gallery 70.1577

Night-Focus-Dawn, 1969

Painted wood, 102 x 117 x 14

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Howard and Jean Lipman 69.73

Nam June Paik (b. 1932)

Zen for TV, 1963–75

Television set, 22 x 15 x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$
Collection of the artist

Lucas Samaras (b. 1936)

Untitled Box No. 3, 1963

Wood, pins, rope, and stuffed bird,
24 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc. 66.36

Untitled, 1964

Pins on wood, 18 x 18 x 18
The Pace Gallery, New York

Box #56, 1966

Mixed media, 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{4}$

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Howard and Jean Lipman 79.52

Robert Smithson (1938–1973)

Non-Site (Palisades, Edgewater, N.J.), 1968

Painted aluminum, enamel, and stone, with map and description of site, 56 x 26 x 36
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc. 69.6ab

Jackie Winsor (b. 1941)

Green Piece, 1976–77

Painted wood, cement, and nails,
32 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 32 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 32 $\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of the artist; courtesy of the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



Lucas Samaras
Box #56, 1966
 Mixed media, 12¼ x 12¼ x 12¼"
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
 Gift of Howard and Jean Lipman 79.52



Eva Hesse
Sans II, 1968
 Fiberglass, 38 x 170¼ x 6⅞" overall
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
 Gift of the Albert A. List Family and Dr. and
 Mrs. Lester J. Honig. 69.105

Traditional distinctions between geometric and organic form blur somewhat in Hesse's work, as it oscillates between standardized and wholly idiosyncratic forms, sometimes combining both in one piece. In *Sans II* (1968), the cubic seriality derives in part from the Minimalist geometric concerns of LeWitt and Donald Judd, both of whose work influenced Hesse. But in opposition to the rigidity and regularity of their work, Hesse asserted a strong sensory expressiveness both in her chosen media and in her personalized forms.

For two decades Sol LeWitt has been exploring the relationship between concept and appearance. Ideas, he believes, should be manifested logically: "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art. . . . Conceptual art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions." LeWitt uses modular grids or cubic units as key elements to emphasize the physical aspects of his sculpture and exclude any other reading. His cubes are made with neutral material (white enamel baked on steel or aluminum) to render the appearance of thought. Following his principle that "some ideas are logical in conception and illogical perceptually," he makes obsessively elaborate compositions from simple modular units by multiplying series of open or closed cubic volumes. Almost incomprehensibly complex, these serial pieces supersede characteristic Minimalist rationality. The repetition of forms implies infinite space, exploring all possible combinations and permutations of a given set of elements.

Donald Judd, who has consistently and vocally sought to eliminate all traces of

representation in his sculpture, frequently uses the box. In *Untitled* (1978), open cubes are identical in size, but each has a piece of wood in its interior chamfered at a different angle. Although the basic serial units are simple, their combination yields a complex and illusionistic optical effect.

Robert Smithson, in his search for new sculptural forms, developed the "non-site." His *Non-Site* (*Palisades, Edgewater, N.J.*) (1968), a tall, rectangular aluminum bin containing rocks taken from the Palisades cliffs, is formally linked to Minimalist sculpture by its box-like shape and overall color. The rocks refer to the Palisades site, while horizontal openings on two sides of the upright box visually suggest the geological layers of the cliffs. The non-site serves as a vertical compression of a landscape, just as the accompanying framed document locates the contents' origins. Smithson wrote that the non-site is a "container within another container—the room. The plot or yard outside is yet another container." Thus, in the context of an exhibition, the non-site also suggests the art gallery as a container of objects, the building as a container of rooms: boxes within boxes within boxes.

Richard Artschwager's sculpture deliberately confounds the viewer. For him perception is neither finite nor simple, but a complex interplay of complementary and contradictory information. *Description of Table* (1964) resembles a real four-legged table, covered by a cloth, and the space beneath it. Its primary function as furniture is negated by its small scale and solid configuration; it is in fact a portrait of an ideal table. The viewer's perception is again confused and manipulated in



Robert Smithson
Non-Site (Palisades, Edgewater, N.J.), 1968
 Painted aluminum, enamel, and stone,
 56 x 26 x 36"
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
 Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman
 Foundation, Inc. 69.6a



Richard Artschwager
Description of Table, 1964
 Formica, 26¼ x 32 x 32"
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
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 Foundation, Inc. 66.48

Construction with Indentation (1966). This wall piece can be read both as an independent, rectangular form because of its overall shape, or as a frame because of its central indentation. Artschwager's *Hair Boxes* (1969) also embody a twofold perception: their potential function as containers is disrupted by the repellent and disturbing rubberized hair.

Like Artschwager, Nam June Paik employs furniture-like forms which contradict their ostensible functions and meanings. Rejecting more traditional sculptural materials, Paik uses modern technology—the box-like television set is his working unit. In *Zen for TV* (1963–75), he modified a television—the ubiquitous container of fantasy and entertainment—so that a single vertical white line appears constantly on the screen. This line invites contemplation, which results from the title's allusion to Zen Buddhism rather than from the passive absorption in a narrative normally associated with television viewing.

Jackie Winsor's use of the cube reflects her roots in the Minimalist aesthetic of the 1960s. Though simple in shape, Winsor's cubes are surprisingly complex. She builds up each one bit by bit, measuring and sawing the wood, layering and nailing with compulsive attention and thought. It is this long, deliberate process of accumulation that gives Winsor's pieces a heavily worked quality and fetishistic power. *Green Piece* (1976–77) is infused with personal significance, for the simple cube form is built from wooden slats taken from the walls of her studio. The square-shaped openings that provide glimpses of unknowable interiors and the rough-hewn surface give *Green Piece* an unexpected

vitality. Winsor's sculpture often combines qualities normally thought mutually exclusive: simplicity and complexity, solidity and permeability, self-sufficiency and dependency, inertia and motion.

Box-like configurations have appeared with exceptional frequency in postwar American sculpture. As a container for assemblage, the box functions as a frame—a kind of miniature tableau. For Minimalist artists and their successors, it became an ideal form for their reductive aesthetic. The box has thus undergone extreme transformations—transformations that belie its ostensible simplicity and testify to the imaginative range of the sculptors.

Acknowledgments

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