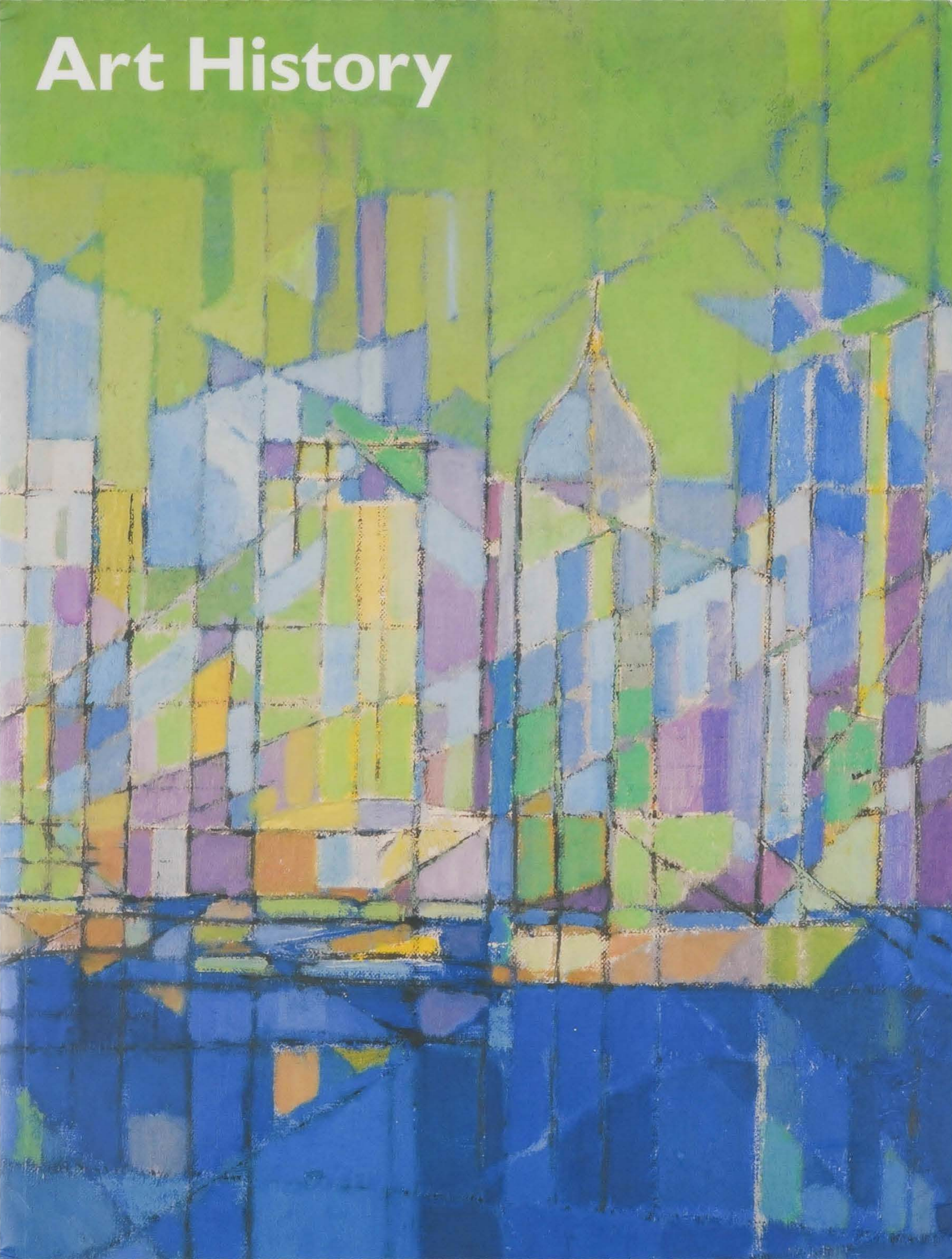
Art History



Art History

Journal of the Association for Art History

John Wiley & Sons Ltd
Oxford, UK and Boston, USA

ISSN 0141-6790 (Print)
ISSN 1467-8365 (Online)

ASSOCIATION FOR ART HISTORY

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Art History is an international, refereed journal that promotes world-class art-historical scholarship from across the globe. It publishes essays and critical reviews that foreground methodological self-reflexivity and highlights specific areas of concern and interest to the field through its special issue programme. It represents the diversity of the discipline at large and welcomes submissions from both established and emerging scholars. *Art History* stands at the forefront of disciplinary challenges and is a model of excellence for original and innovative research.

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Production Editor Vangie Gan (email: AHIS@wiley.com)

Information for Subscribers *Art History* is published in 5 issues per year. Institutional subscription prices for 2022 are: Print & Online: US$1885 (US), €1,248 (Europe), £984 (UK), US$2202 (Rest of World). Prices are exclusive of tax. Asia-Pacific GST, Canadian GST/HST and European VAT will be applied at the appropriate rates. For more information on current tax rates, please go to https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/library-info/products/price-lists/payment. The price includes online access to the current and all online backfiles to January 1st 2018, where available. For other pricing options, including access information and terms and conditions, please visit https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/library-info/products/price-lists. Terms of use can be found here: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions.

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Periodical ID Statement *Art History* (ISSN 0141-6790) is published 5 times a year in February, April, June, September and November. Postmaster: Send all address changes to *Art History*, Wiley Periodicals LLC, C/O The Sheridan Press, P.O. Box 465, Hanover, PA 17331 USA.

Printed in the UK by Hobbs the Printers Ltd.

Books for Review All copies should be sent to: Reviews Editor, *Art History*, 70 Cowcross Street, Clerkenwell, London, EC1M 6EJ, UK.

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Cover: Detail of Ahmad Sadali, *Skyline of New York*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 47 × 75 cm. Singapore: National Gallery Singapore. Photo: National Heritage Board.

'Kind of Goya-esque or Something': Charles Ray's Early Works

Dominic Johnson

In Charles Ray's *Plank Piece I-II* (1973), the artist creates a sculptural assemblage that holds him uncomfortably aloft. There has been little critical attention to his earliest performed sculptures created between from around 1973 to 1980, beyond characterizations as jejune experiments, homages, or hijinks. I seize on a statement by Ray that when he claimed in the 1970s that the works '[had] no meaning – or rather their meaning is dynamic, [...] my friends laughed at me and said, "You idiot, it looks like the aftermath of a car wreck or a Goya print".' I pursue his 'idiotic' invocations: an eerily reminiscent etching by Goya; automobile disasters; the American War in Vietnam; and other contingent phenomena. The effect is a sustained experiment in looking, reading, and writing. Reading against the grain, *Plank Piece I-II* provokes hermeneutic challenges – and new methodologies for criticism – towards a refashioning of meaning and history in performance.

Dominic Johnson is Professor of Performance and Visual Culture, and Head of the Department of Drama at Queen Mary University of London. He is the author of four monographs including: Unlimited Action: The Performance of Extremity in the 1970s *(Manchester University Press, 2019); and* The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art *(Bloomsbury, 2015). He is the editor of five books including* Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey *(The University of Chicago Press, 2013).*

Crossing the Line: Cristóbal de Villalpando and the Surplus of Script

Aaron M. Hyman

In 1706 Cristóbal de Villalpando signed a painting with an unusual, intensive calligraphic flourish, and sent it from Mexico City far to the north. This essay describes Villalpando's decision to invest so much pictorial energy in letterforms against this geographic backdrop. Doing so reveals several social registers in which writing had taken on particular professional charge, and opens on to a yet broader artistic sensitivity to writing: its forms and modes of production. The Spanish Empire's extensive bureaucracy of paper made imperial subjects highly sensitive to script's visual and material qualities, such that Villalpando and his fellow artists could capitalize upon them both to produce meaning within their pictures, and to engineer particular constructions of self. In juxtaposing distinct domains of writing – notarial, educational, performative – with paintings, this essay stakes a methodological claim for considering the archive, broadly conceived, as a place just as important for looking as for reading and transcription.

Aaron M. Hyman is Assistant Professor in the Department of History of Art at Johns Hopkins University, and author of Rubens in Repeat: The Logic of the Copy in Colonial Latin America *(Getty Research Institute, 2021).*
Recent research, including for this essay, has been supported by a Marilyn Thoma Post-Doctoral Fellowship from the Thoma Foundation, the Audrey Lumsden-Kouvel Long-Term Fellowship at the Newberry Library, and a faculty fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies.

'Kind of Goya-esque or Something': Charles Ray's Early Works

Dominic Johnson

A human person, presumptively white and male, hangs cantilevered here; and beside him, another, upside down and inside out. Neither has a face. In the first photograph, the body is pinioned at the waist by a plank, such that the legs hang straight down, and the trunk folds over at a near right angle. His arms dangle dead, and his head and long dark hair loll forward, gravity pulling them parallel to legs and wall. Dressed in belted black jeans, dark desert boots, and a black sweatshirt, all the skin one sees is that of his smooth, white, neutrally held hand. The plank itself, propped from a plaster-strewn carpet, is robust, raggedly hewn, and old. A deep split follows the grain from the base, stopped by a large fateful knot. The edges of the plank are straight but not crisp, roughened by extensive use. The strangely draped body and unassuming plank are mutually shambolic, insensate, nonsensically interoperative. Defaced, impassive, and pinned some three feet above the floor, the body caught in its unlikely grip looks incapacitated and unresponsive, uncanny or statue-like (though not statuesque). He is hapless, possibly lifeless. If the image is bleak, it is hesitant in its violence, vague even, and cut through with humour, or a lightness that is hard to diagnose (*plate 1* and *plate 2*).

In the second threadbare cantilever, always shown alongside the first, and most frequently (though not exclusively) shown to its right, the same slack, faceless body is pinioned by its same worn plank, though this time at the soft, sensitive popliteal parts behind the knees. From the leg folds sharply bent, the front of his body meets the cold expanse of the same blemished wall: his kneecaps, thighs, groin, abdomen, torso, chest, throat, face, arms, palms, and outstretched fingers lay flatly pressed, creating unnatural contours down the back of his body. The shape might feel pleasant to him or might feel awful: it's difficult to tell from looking. How long before the stretch gets medieval, rack-like? Do his tendons feel like they'll give out and his joints will separate? When will the wall, its cool surface at first calming, feel too chilly and unyielding on his face and hands? (Memory of hot cheek on cold taut bedsheet.) We see more of his body here, but barely: his senseless hands, again; a strip of skin around his ankles; an ephemeral swathe in the small of his back, where his sweater, caught or diffidently tucked at the front, pulls away from belted jeans. Indeed, he wears the same clothes as in the first image, making it likely the setups were performed sequentially in a single day. The status of the experiment is also suggested by the presence of two eye bolts in the supporting wall, to the left of his body in each image: redundant remainders of a previous activity, they suggest that the present undertaking is not so lofty or precious as to have required their extraction, or the cosmetic filling of holes, to professionalize the scene.

Detail from Francisco de Goya, *Great Deeds Against the Dead* ('Grande hazaña Con muertos!'), c. 1810–13 (*plate 13*).

DOI: 10.1111/1467-8365.12649
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1 Charles Ray, *Plank Piece I*, 1973. One of two black-and-white photographs, 100 × 69 cm. © Charles Ray. Photo: Matthew Marks Gallery.

Its identity as Charles Ray's body remains concealed by the images: denied a face, his personality and particularity are neither disclosed nor embellished by the camera (the pictures, definitively, are not portraits). We do not know who took the photographs.[1] We do not know how Ray mounted the plank in each action: whether ladders or furniture, suspended ropes or human ballasts were deployed (and then provisionally withdrawn) to create the images. We do not know how long he stayed in position: seconds, minutes, an hour, more? We do not know if the occurrences were painful, anxious, restful, thoughtless, amusing, or hijinks. The absence of such

information across the meagre para-texts, published reflections and interviews that complement the series suggests that withholding the mundane or practical details of its execution is necessary, or at least amenable, to how the work makes meaning or creates its effects. Looking at the photographs in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, I am beaming, and a stranger stands next to me; I turn smilingly to her, and she grimaces, sucks air softly through her teeth in a cringing sigh, and then laughs. The exchange says something about this strange work, its faltering representation of masochistic farce, or pointless ascetism, whose ideal affective response may vacillate unstably between surprise, pleasure, sympathetic pain, undefended laughter and disquiet. Looking closely may also prompt other, more volatile or haphazard responses, too. 'Photographs might seduce us, pleating and folding a past into our present,' Patrizia di Bello writes, 'but never to a conclusive end. Their meaning is never

2 Charles Ray, *Plank Piece I*, 1973. One of two black-and-white photographs, 100 × 69 cm. © Charles Ray. Photo: Matthew Marks Gallery.

enunciated but always also implied by looks, body postures and actions; not (only) those in the photograph, but those we perform as we interact with photographs.'[2] This human body hangs high upon the wall, but its ascent is occulted. We cringe or laugh, feel remote. He is caught by the plank for an unstated duration, and more permanently by the image. In both, he is incapable of falling.

Caught on the oblique, moving crookedly up a wall, Ray is held aloft from the ground, but only barely: elongated by his own weight, his fingers are now inches from touching the untidy carpet, likely moving marginally closer in yogic release, though never to make contact unless the plank slips (a minor catastrophe in waiting). In the second image, because the photograph is taken less frontally, we see more of the room: a given space, probably a studio, with beams, generic lighting, a trestle table, and a screen, all whitewashed into camouflage but visible beyond the functionally carpeted edge. The colour of the world has been drained. The images are black and white.

Plank/Blank

Charles Ray has described his diptych sequence *Plank Piece I-II* (1973) simply and bluntly: 'My body is a sculptural element pinned to the wall by a wood plank'.[3] *Plank Piece I-II* stages a critical encounter between a series of constants: the floor, the wall, a body, a prop, and the force of gravity – and variables, including the artist's will, feeling, stamina, and commitment. Through these choreographed adjacencies, a further dialogue is enabled between sculpture, performance art, and photographic documentation. In the photographic record of each performed sculpture, the plank meets the body at a point at which it can fold (I never thought of a body quite like this, as a folding thing, fan- or furniture-like). In neither does the collapsing body fold wholly to meet the shape given it by the inflexible propping of the plank between floor and wall. A torso cannot pleat so sleekly in the hips (the wedging of the plank in the gut must be painful, and perhaps must be positioned just so to be at all bearable, for whatever duration he held the pose), and neither can his heels fall back to touch the plank directly without dislocating the knees. Ray's person is not properly collapsible, which inhibits the perfection of his images and gives them their prankish humour. The imperfection of the body's endeavour also suggests, to me, the affective dynamism of prevailing over a self-directed (typically pointless) endurance and of corporeal frailty under duress: two common effects of performance art in the same period.[4] This combination affords a kind of pathos, secured by the humility of the handmade. The totality of these qualities lends the images their humanity, the dignity that comes with being unbending in one's endurance, of resisting failure, despite situational pressure (with gravitas or in gravity): his body is resistant, durable, steadfast in honour or ardour. It is layered, folded, but not folding to another's will or whim. Where objects can be designed ergonomically to meet the contours of a body, such that knives can be grasped or backs and asses supported by chairs, the body's architectures respond poorly to being draped on shapes, Ray shows us.

Ray's series seems to secure the cool formalism of its own endeavour, that sense of his investigations as driven by an interest solely in material contiguities ('My body is a sculptural element'), an intersection of impassive planes ('pinned to the wall by a wood plank'), as an embodied but detached experiment in time and space. In both props, the plank creates a sharp triangle of negative space between the carpet and the white wall, muddied by the intervening parts of a body: in one, the listless legs, in the other, much of Ray, whole but oddly flattened on the inside. The setup is as much an exploration of image-making as of physical weight: his body yields to gravity, but also seems as if surrendered weightless by the supporting mass of the plank. The correctness of the plank's weight, not too heavy and not too light, and its associated density are necessary

to the architectural integrity and relative safety of the undertaking. Too heavy (a panel of granite or cold-rolled steel) and it would crush him; too light a board and he would fall. Too brittle (a pane of glass) and disaster might ensue: cuts in the flesh, disembowelment, total bisection even.

The discomfiture of the body in the assemblage reminds us of the brute resistance of all living bodies to their own dehumanization or disorganization, even when the motivating desire stems from the body itself, and not some sadistic external agent. No one has forced Ray into his predicament, and he could abandon it at any time. By virtue of being a living body, with all its shapely substance and bearing the shapelessness of his life, this body necessarily indulges but resists its own sculptural potential. It does so despite the impassive claim of Ray's caption. This is typical of the linguistic blankness with which artists described such 'pieces', a mode of making that afforded a split primacy to image and action in the 1960s and 1970s, caught in the hinge between performance art and conceptual art. Whether in the 'rationalistic' or 'obsessional' vein, Frazer Ward writes that art in the fold between performance and conceptual art 'shares a complex ambivalence toward the uncertain determinations of subjectivity within the institutional frame of art, as it takes its place, in turn, in a wider public sphere'.[5] Such works, he continues, model different possibilities for a newly demystified aesthetic subject: ones typically founded on undecidability, including by way of sophisticated as well as artfully stupid formulae. The unruliness of Ray's body, its shambolic personal style, and its inevitable failure to merge with the triangulation between wall, floor, and plank, undoes his own full subordination to the angular clarity seemingly promised in the assemblages. The plank is just a plank, not a bridge, gangplank, stele, coffin lid or funerary slab. The body is just a body, not obviously living, possibly dead.

You Idiot

If his earliest statement suggests the dumb neutrality and studious formalism of *Plank Piece I-II*, Ray has since admitted the emotional and perhaps political complexity of the series. In an interview in 2015, he reflects:

> These two photographs have no meaning – or rather their meaning is dynamic. As a young man, I denied any empathetic reading of the work. I insisted that *Plank I* and *II* were about a relationship between a wall, a plank, and the junctures and weight of my own body. My friends laughed at me and said, 'You idiot, it looks like the aftermath of a car wreck or a Goya print'.[6]

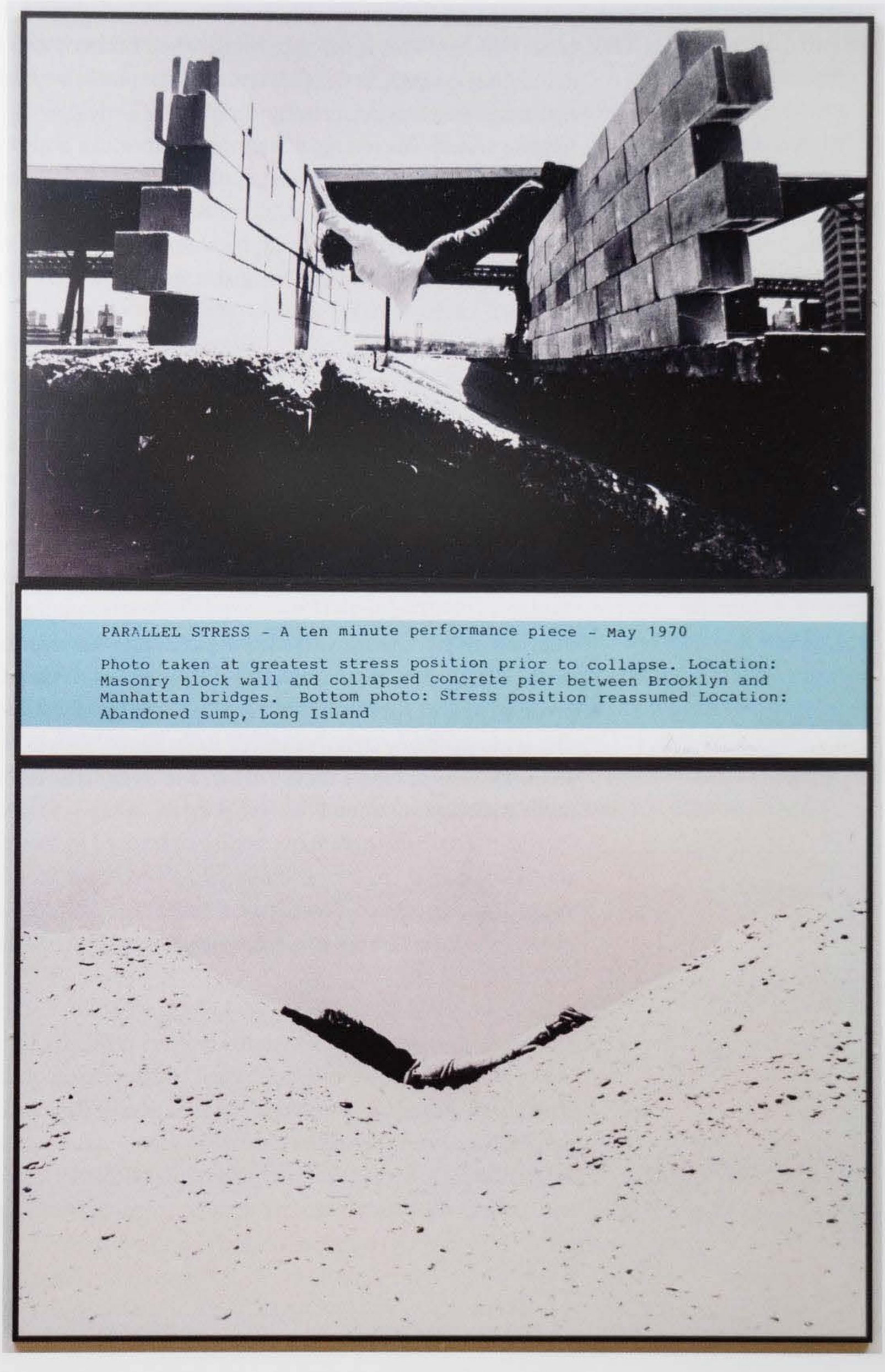
The artist proclaims the work's apparent meaninglessness (or promiscuity, or dynamism), suggesting the body as one more available material in post-minimalist investigations of materiality and distribution, alongside, say, the fold, the drape, the scatter. Yet he also admits that *Plank Piece I-II* could index injury, disaster, or death, perhaps to traffic into the images the moment of social and political upheaval in which it was made. Despite Ray's youthful naivete, his laughing friends sound a call to consider the central relation between the body and the object, and the concomitant problems for the production of meaning, in the encounter with *Plank Piece I-II*.

While the work emerges from a 'dynamic' but discretely formal approach to image-making, signalled in Ray's aesthetically austere denial of strict meaning and affective depth in the encounter it solicits, it wrestles with its own apparent disavowal of precise synthetic reference and narrative potential. While this may be the nature of our encounter with any work of art, it is pronounced here in the way Ray's photographs seem to say so little, at least at first glance, modelling what Jon

Thompson calls (after Piero Manzoni's earlier example) 'the dumb work of art, the work of art that refuses to vocalise'.[7] In our encounter, we may seek to make it produce meaning, even against itself: the body looks like it has been thrown and caught (as if in the aftermath of a collision with something bigger than it); or else it has been put there – deliberately posed as a trophy or souvenir or stashed with murderous abandon, against its own wishes, and perhaps with great violence. Has this body been mutilated, violated, or killed? Such is the core of Ray's admission that the images can invoke or reference imagined repertoires at odds with the artist's own historical desires. His interlocutors' shared insight remains powerful, or gains in potency, in the ensuing years, as demonstrated by the fact that Ray remembers the remark and repeats it some forty years later to call into question, de-sublimate, or resolve rather brazenly the ambivalence he previously attributed to the works. Indeed, Ray repeated the gesture once again in late 2020, acknowledging in conversation that while the action was uncomfortable or painful, he had 'refused to look at the empathetic aspects of [the images]. Now they look kind of Goya-esque or something.'[8]

What to make of these strange images, which disclose so little but sustain our attention? Across its critical reception, *Plank Piece I-II* yields questions about the limits of artistic categories and stages the sculptural potential of the body and the processual habit of much contemporary sculpture. Moreover, it poses meta-critical rejoinders to art history, as a studied fiasco posed both within recent developments (especially in performance art and conceptual art) and subtly against modernist orthodoxy; and poses a playful intrusion of live matter and real feeling into an assemblage of found materials. Yet the work's particular potential for meaning, determined too strongly elsewhere by a critical faith in its exclusively formal attitude, remains powerfully imprecise, unstudied, or unsaid.

Pictorially, *Plank Piece I-II* resembles Dennis Oppenheim's *Parallel Stress* (1970, *plate* 3). In the first panel of *Parallel Stress*, Oppenheim is suspended face-down between a masonry-block wall and a collapsed concrete pier in New York City, taking up what the work describes as the 'greatest stress position before collapse'; in the second, exhibited beneath the first with an intervening framed caption, Oppenheim repeats the concave shape through his arms, back and legs, by lying in a ravine between two dunes in an abandoned sump or cesspit in Long Island. Whereas Ray's body may not contain references to situations or settings beyond the studio, Oppenheim's body creates a link to two scenes of wreckage, inventing and resolving through his own masculine endurance the relation between a 'collapsing' body, an urban wound (the failing architectural constructions) and a place of filth (the rural cesspit). Unlike Oppenheim's actions, *Plank Piece I-II* limits our knowledge of its setting, which may be part of what curbs one's attempt to make it do social or political work, beyond the associations one might make with the social reality of an artist's studio: a space of invention and serious play, of self-quarantining from the social, and of some entitlement. For art historian Heather Diack, Oppenheim's works stage a striking tension between, on the one hand, the low political stakes of much conceptual art involving endurance or discomfort – here evidenced in the 'reticent' and 'unemotional' tone of his works – and, on the other, what she identifies as the potential for such images to act otherwise, 'tapping into the crisis of [their] moment and contending with the increasing normalization of unfathomable aggression'.[9] Diack considers another of Oppenheim's twin-mounted photographic actions, *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn* (1970), in which the artist reclines on a beach and appears to use an open book as a template with which to burn its shape into his skin, akin to a photogram made with sun. Strikingly, Diack sees the images as imprinted with the Kent State massacre of the same year, the illegitimate



3 Dennis Oppenheim, *Parallel Stress*, 1970. Two black-and-white photographs on paper, and ink on paper mounted onto board, 228 × 152 cm (displayed). London: Tate. © Estate of Dennis Oppenheim. Photo: Tate.

killing of four nonviolent student demonstrators by armed guards. The image repertoire of the atrocity appears for Diack as a visceral latency in the photographs that represent Oppenheim's action, laying a productive ground for studying Ray's performances for camera by linking them imaginatively to the disruptive historical moment from which they emerge.[10]

How, then, to sustain one's solicitation by *Plank Piece I-II*? How to figure the way this sculptural enterprise both is and is not reminiscent of, or latent with, a disaster of war

(a Goya print) or a thoroughly modern, technologized catastrophe in miniature (a car wreck)? What is the relation between his body and the studio at the margins of the photographs, or the polyvalent social reality beyond it, a time of war, civil rights movements, the lunar landing? What body does his designate: a universal body (one it cannot); the young, white, male, American body circa 1973; or the further particularized body of an artist, slacker, or soldier (his desert boots look vaguely military)? Is *Plank Piece I-II* a blank, or does it sound a call? Is it an absurdity, or could it, as Ray belatedly seems to admit, speak to human frailty, sadness and suffering, death and disaster, despite or even because it invokes an anomalous kind of laughter?

Idiot Bliss

Primarily a sculptor, Ray has long been formally promiscuous in his adoption, refinement, and sequential overcoming of styles and aesthetic signatures. As Peter Schjeldahl writes, 'Ray is a gadfly conscience of a culture given to the myth that artists are free to do whatever they like', suggesting something politically or socially symptomatic in his disinhibited intermediality.[11] Ray was acknowledged as a significant artist through his sculptures of the 1990s and, notably, his figurative mannequin pieces, beginning with the jokily orgiastic onanism of *Oh Charley, Charley, Charley...* (1992) (*plate 4*). Here, Ray created eight surrogates for himself by moulding mannequin-like forms with his own cast face; the array of naked Rays stand, kneel, lie prostrate, or hold one another prone with hands on ankles or haunches. Each Ray prepares to suck, penetrate, or be penetrated by himself, creating a dioramic orgy that is either funny or horrible. For Kelly Baum, the ensemble is more than a joke about the masturbatory nature of art. She writes that Ray undermines the traditional myth-making function of the self-portrait, while remaining strategically 'lifeless' and 'dysfunctional': the mannequins cannot be used to model clothes, and the sex they are positioned to engage in cannot be achieved, for each of Ray's doppelgangers fails to penetrate another.[12] This theme or effect of redundancy, ambivalence, or impotent play is pervasive in his work, beginning arguably with his performed works of the early 1970s.

Ray's critical reception has often focused on his controversial public monuments, and meticulously crafted reconstructions (a crashed car, tractor, and fallen tree).[13] However, there has been scant critical consideration of his earliest performed sculptures, including the generative function of *Plank Piece I-II*, despite its extensive exhibition record. The work's amusing combination of precocity, aesthetic austerity, and intellectual vacuity is suggested in the tendency among Ray's critics to describe it as exclusively formal, an experiment in tone, as meta-aesthetic, and at least implicitly empty in terms of political or social content. For most critics, *Plank Piece I-II* demonstrates the integration of the body into a sculptural assemblage, though typically the claim is made so swiftly that the stakes of such a critical move on Ray's part remain provisional. Donna De Salvo writes beguilingly that *Plank Piece I-II* 'appropriate[s] the body as a kind of Duchampian readymade in order to provoke calculated responses in the viewer', adding in the context of the exploration of generative or repetitive 'open systems' in the 1970s that Ray 'literally folds his body into his art object to intimate the implied presence of the body in sculpture'.[14] The latent political potential of *Plank Piece I-II* may reside in the way Ray transmutates the body as a raw sculptural material. Anne Wagner describes it as the first in a series of attempts at 'resupplying the body so pointedly omitted in contemporary abstract work', specifically as a rejoinder to Richard Serra's propped sculptures of the 1960s.[15] *Plank Piece I-II* distinctly resembles Serra's *Prop* (1968), a large sheet of alloyed lead held up on a wall by the counterforce

of a polished pipe; propped on the floor (at an angle equivalent to Ray's plank), the rolled steel cylinder buttresses the incorrigible heft of the thick grey squarish panel in a dramatic feat of internal stability that seems to defy gravity, positioned and caught just so (*plate* 5). In Serra's piece, all parts are made of the same lead antinomy, which avoids a hierarchy between the prop and the thing being propped up: this is not the case in Ray's prop, where pathos or punch comes from the confusion of a seemingly natural order or relation between the insensate wood that props and supports – yet threatens to injure – the unresponsive body of the artist. The risk of slippage – and its likely catastrophic results, both for the supporting architecture of the space as well as to the safety of its viewers (and, infamously, its handlers) – is more awesome or awful in Serra's assemblage than in Ray's: strangely, the intervention of Ray's body into the assemblage seems to lighten the perceived recklessness of the setup, rather than to heighten it, partly because Ray's supporting elements are lightweight and pedestrian, risky as a pratfall, where Serra's are terrifying, for fiasco here proves fatal.[16] Comparing *Prop* to *Plank Piece I-II* suggests – in a surprising reversal – that the integration of the body as a sculptural element scrambles our sense of the risk to be incurred, possibly because we can only encounter the raw materials of *Plank Piece I-II* through the mediating function of the photographs, whereas *Prop* attacks us in the flesh (if we encounter it in person, at least). If *Prop* is a joke, it is an arduously constructed one, too poised, arched, and leaden to be properly funny. While *Prop* has a wildness to its setup that startles, and makes me crack a brief smile, the humour of *Plank Piece I-II* is zanier, fuller, on account of its ramshackle-ness, and the throwaway style of how it is put together.

The formal resemblance between *Plank Piece I-II* and Serra's *Prop* is attractive, though pursuing it further might tend to secure *Plank Piece I-II* as a refusal of or tepid tarry with the blue-chip authority of contemporary minimalist sculpture. Wagner

4 Charles Ray, *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...*, 1992. Painted fibreglass and hair, 183 × 457 × 457 cm. © Charles Ray. Photo: Matthew Marks Gallery.

5 Richard Serra, *Prop*, 1968. Lead antimony, 219.1 × 152.4 × 148.8 cm. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art (1978.44.a-b) Photo: MCA, Chicago/ARS, NY and DACS, London/Nathan Keay.

has noted that while Ray is indebted to minimalism and postmodernism, he is 'not mortgaged to either'.[17] In its perceived neutrality and lucidity, minimalism tends to suggest an extreme formalism and, for some, the freedom for all to participate in the reception of a pared-back, direct, apparently unmediated artistic gesture. However, Anna Chave argues that this stagily uncommunicative sensibility makes space for primary values such as 'unfeelingness' and 'a will to control or dominate', which contradicts a democratic politics of wilful and equal self-determination; specifically, Chave describes the 'harrowing' and 'nakedly territorial' claiming of space by Serra's colossal sculptures, which divide or impose upon their surroundings, and terrorize their interlocutors.[18] She points to minimalist art's refusal to speak to the context of the prolonged American war in Vietnam, or singular events such as the Kent State massacre, in its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s. Chave argues that in its negation or nihilism, minimalism could not relieve (and much less intervene in) the political

conditions of total war, social unrest, alienated production, and technocracy, in the advanced industrial society in which its works were created and displayed. Chave's influential argument suggests the stakes of separating out Ray's debts to minimalism (and to Serra in particular) and in pursuing, rather, his allusions in other directions.

Wagner describes *Plank Piece I-II* as kickstarting Ray's 'still-unfinished investigation into the nature of sculptural objects as bodily things', a process of experimentation more substantially pursued in his better-known, museum-friendly figurative sculptures since the 1990s.[19] Such an idea can tend tacitly to suggest that – at least potentially, or in fantasy – a body can be turned into a non-human material (to wood, bronze, salt or stone) when it enters the sculptural assemblage. Curator Kelly Baum makes the claim directly when she writes that 'Ray's early performances [...] treated his body like so much clay, a material to be wrapped and hoisted, bent and folded'.[20] When uncritical, the forgetting of the distance between a human body and an object or insensate material is bleak in the light of the long history of treating bodies as objects, in acts of individual or systemic violence, from assault to war to chattel slavery.[21] Wagner also stages the work as juvenilia, as generative but perhaps jejune, which is fair considering that *Plank Piece* was made during Ray's time as an undergraduate student in Hans Breder's pioneering Intermedia programme at the University of Iowa. This was early in his protean phase, too; he was aged twenty, in his second year of study, and graduated two years later in 1975. In an exhaustive commentary on Ray's sculptures, Michael Fried devotes a few lines to *Plank Piece I-II*, extending Wagner's invocations by comparing the work briefly to Serra's wall pieces, as well as to the pristine leaning plank sculptures of West Coast 'finish fetish' artist John McCracken, and to Anthony Caro's 'inspired use of angled elements'.[22] Fried explains that while he previously found the diptych 'amusing but in the end not remotely serious', at the time of writing he could see the two photographs as recursive acts of strategic or revisionist modernism: 'they look back to modernism, as if posing the question: might there conceivably be a place in the canon of serious art for high-jinks of this calibre?'[23] According to Ray's critics, then, the human conundrums of *Plank Piece I-II* are anomalies without transcendence, iterative systems that beguile but lack the potential for social or political commentary or a more powerful embodied response on the part of the affectively engaged viewer. The liveness, vulnerability and vitality of the body remain unstated, as does the moral dilemma that comes with regarding the body of another as mere, insensate matter. Nor do we come to understand the ethical and political dramas that attend the act of looking more closely, and with great and unresolved fascination, at Ray's assemblages.

Arisings

Plank Piece I-II does not evoke the timelessness presumed by sculptural or painterly abstraction, but the contingency made known, figuratively, by a body in discomfort. Bodily discomfort, or its deeper embodiments, pain or anguish, cannot but be timely, in or of its own time (time as history, rather than a form of thought). In each image, it occurs to me, Ray attempts to pass vertically upside the wall – that is, to levitate – an illusion of or desire for transcendence that undoes the strict formalism of his own stated endeavour. Here is a full-grown man, casually dressed, lifted high against gravity's pull, and dangling enfeebled from a plank, unable it seems to free himself, or do much else for that matter. What might be the relation between the palpable absurdity and agential neutrality of this act and the historical context in which it is made? Why levitate so unsteadily, badly, baldly and share it? Indeed, *Plank Piece I-II* is not Ray's sole attempt at an infelicitous levitation. Performed in the same year, *Untitled* (1973) is an intervention for an incidental audience in which Ray's body is lashed

helplessly to the high boughs of a tree and remains there hanging face-down for a solitary afternoon (*plate* 6). Also in the same year: captured in a series of nine black-and-white photographs, Ray hangs horizontal on his studio wall, tied by ropes threaded through seven pulleys and wound round his body (he wears the same attire as in *Plank Piece I-II*). Across the latter series, Ray unbinds himself from his predicament, dropping from the clutched rope in the penultimate image. The final image shows the empty rope snagged on the wall (*plate* 7). A tenth image is extant: published in an interview by Dennis Cooper (the text of which Cooper apparently forged), it is not considered part of the finished work.[24] However, this supplementary image (which Ray's studio withheld permission to reproduce here) shows that the rope is held taut at the sides by abettors, who have been edited from the frame across Ray's finished series. The strain on the abettors, who lean to give ballast to his guileless transcendence, stages balance, weight and pressure as a relational commitment among bodies, or a contract of sorts. If one of the two supporting bodies cannot take the strain, the body in the centre will fail in its endeavour, and fall. *Plank Piece I-II* forfeits this collaborative, interpersonal dynamic: he might well be able to trust the plank better than his friends, not for their lack of commitment or will, but because their support must eventually waver.

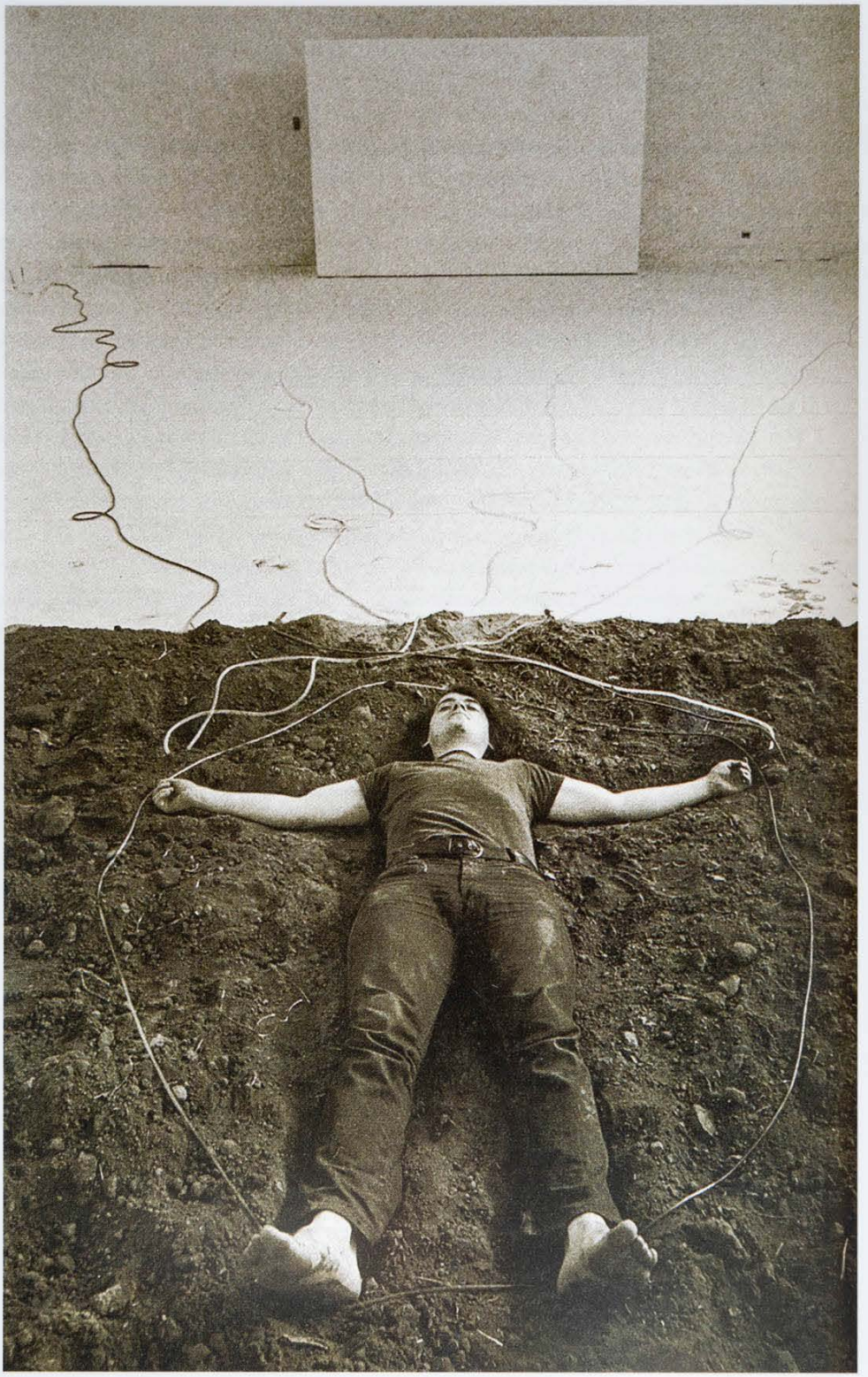
In the impossible feat of levitation that is *Plank Piece I-II*, Ray keeps good company among performance artists in the 1970s, for whom – looking obliquely, at least – the attempt at weightlessness, gravitational transcendence, or flight appears to be a frequent motivating problem. As an awkward act of suspension or levitation, *Plank Piece I-II* might invite comparisons to performances in the same period such as: Trisha Brown's *Man Walking Down the Side of the Building* (1970), in which an abseiling male performer defies gravity by walking a vertical axis, supported in his controlled

6 Charles Ray, *Untitled*, 1973. Black-and-white photograph, 69 × 102 cm. © Charles Ray. Photo: Matthew Marks Gallery.

7 Charles Ray, *Untitled*, 1973. Nine black-and-white photographs, 22 × 191 cm. © Charles Ray. Photo: Matthew Marks Gallery/Josh White.

descent by an umbilical-looking rope; or Chris Burden's *Icarus* (1973), in which the naked artist allegorizes the hubristic fall of the performance's namesake, as an assistant pours gasoline onto glass panels that lean against his shoulders, and sets them alight. Both Brown and Burden merge the messianic with the pathetic: the effect of each is remarkable (miraculous and alarming, respectively) as well as bathetic in their non-transcendence. The bathos in any such act is its *levity*: indeed, both levity and levitation find their etymological root in the same sign, that of *levitās* – lightness and inconstancy (also, obscurely, agility), whether of mood or body. Where Brown's perpendicular funambulist is illusionistic but jerry-rigged, Burden's burning man is grandiose, but pointedly grounded (the best Icarus can achieve here is a panicked leap to his feet, sending his glass wings crashing). In a cultural history of levitation, Peter Adey describes a notable precursor, Bruce Nauman's *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966), as a demonstration of how 'deflation, error and failure are part and parcel of the levitator'; levitators, he observes, including those who are artists, 'must eventually come back to earth, and they rarely land all that gracefully'.[25] Neither Brown nor Burden (nor, indeed, Nauman) can be read as politically committed in any strict or obvious fashion, hence their deflationary effects; yet each could, like Ray, be said to stage the reintegration of the self in the wake of the disembodied imperatives of minimalism and conceptual art in the same period.

In 1970, Terry Fox performed *Levitation* in a Bay Area gallery. First he fasted, let blood and urinated to spend himself of weight and density. He then lay supine on a bed of soil and attempted to lend himself psychic buoyancy through meditation, holding tubes containing elemental substances, as if the residual powers of milk, blood, water and urine might unburden him of his terrestrial bounds: the universal problem of materiality, and the particular difficulty of his endurance of, and ongoing medical treatment for, Hodgkin lymphoma (*plate 8*). Fox recalled, 'I was trying to think about leaving the ground until I realized I should be thinking about entering the air. For me, that [...] made it work, I mean, I levitated. After the fourth hour, I couldn't feel any part of my body', a feeling of paralysis that separates Fox from self-sameness with his body and represents or expedites the ambition of 'entering the air'.[26] Levity departs the scene in the fact of his illness, his fantasy of recuperation, and his hope for transcendence (he went into remission from lymphatic cancer in 1972). The Los Angeles artist, Bas Jan Ader's *Fall* series, also of the early 1970s, shows him succumbing to gravity as he plummets downwards through unfilled space. Counterintuitively, its constituent works also suggest demonstrations of flawed attempts at transcending or overcoming it: for a second, perhaps, it seems as though he might hang in the air, rather than fall in fiasco from his roof, tree or bicycle. In his *Introduction to Documenta* (1972), James Lee Byars stands some sixty feet above the entrance to the Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany in suspended animation above those entering the exhibition, and facing inwards to kiss to tympanum.[27] Towards the end of the decade, Franklin Aalders undertook another striking attempt at levitation: in *Sculpture for Viaduct* (1978), wearing pink overalls, he attached himself to the concrete support of the massive Apeldoornseweg Viaduct near Arnhem, Netherlands (*plate 9*). Remaining there in a jokey spectacle of groundlessness for around one hour until policemen arrived to remove him, his action suggests

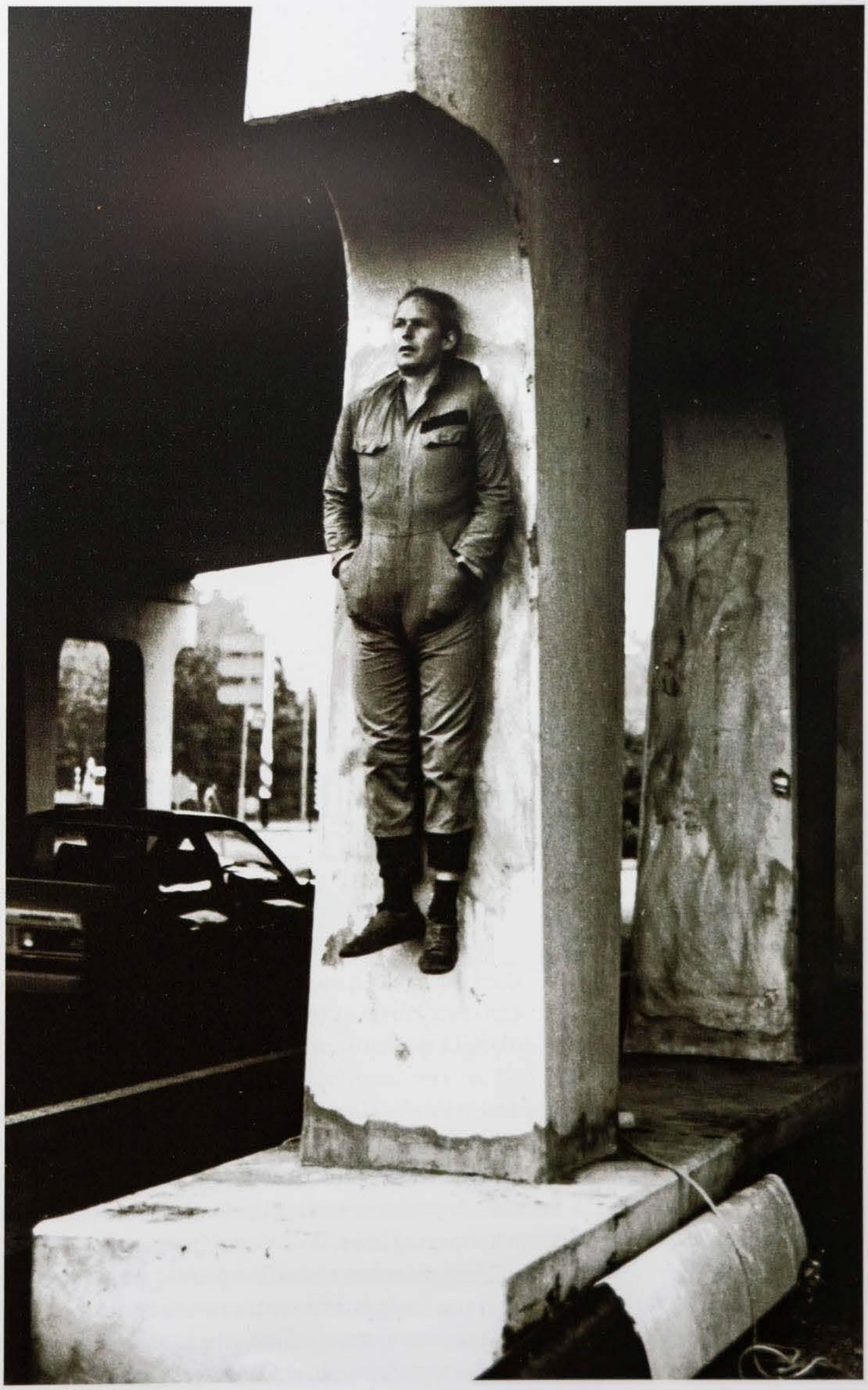


8 Terry Fox, *Levitation*, 1970. Black-and-white photograph from performance at Richmond Art Center, California. © Estate of Terry Fox. Photo: Köln & VG Bild Kunst/Marita Loosen Fox.

perhaps that the mundane materiality of laws depletes the transcendent imagination, breaking his suspenseful, suspended vigil. Aalders himself considered the fuller series of street works, including lying naked in motorway guttering at the edge of a city or occupying a traffic island for twenty-four hours, as an attempt to use 'the undulating movements of the traffic as a flexible plastic that the [...] traffic participants [or drivers] make together'.[28] Like Ray, the work is evocative but difficult to diagnose in explicitly

political or activist terms. Unlike *Plank Piece I-II*, the mechanics of Aalders' homespun levitation are concealed in the image. A reporter discloses that he attached himself with industrial strength glue, and describes Aalders tearing off his overalls to remove himself and avoid arrest.[29]

The apparently common urge among male artists in the 1970s *to rise up* – to be freed from earthly constraints – might be contrasted briefly to the subterranean desire in



9 Franklin Aalders, *Sculpture for Viaduct*, 1978. Black-and-white photograph from performance as part of Behavior Performance Festival, 25 September 1978, Arnhem, Netherlands. © The Estate of Franklin Aalders. Photo: Courtesy of Ionika Aalders.

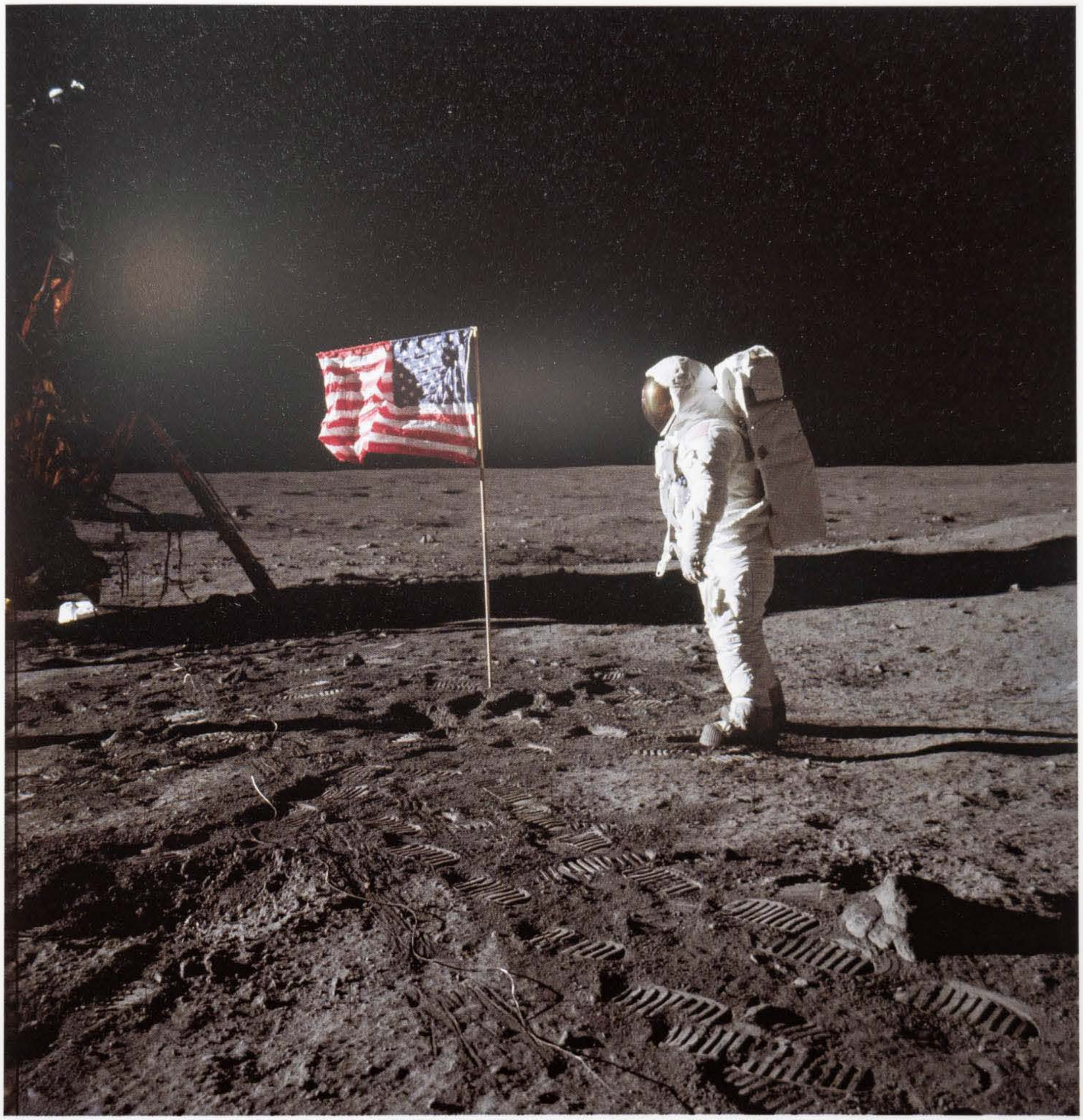
the same period: the attempt, conditioned by a kind of existential dread, to burrow underground, to seek shelter from the nuclear dawn, to lay oneself bare in scenes of disappearance, and subjective destitution. The body goes literally to ground in Stuart Brisley's *Survival in Alien Circumstances* (1977), for example, during which Brisley dug a ditch in Kassel, Germany and lived for a fortnight amid the rising groundwater, mud and stones, digging materials and archaeological discoveries: the detritus of war and parts of a human skeleton, each a cipher of annihilation.

Why did the men surveyed above suspend themselves aloft in and as performance? Why and with what effect can they be found perching on ledges or posing on supports, leaping off pediments or floating down walls, as if to tempt gravity by trying and failing to levitate? What common source of encouragement tempted them to leave the ground? In search of what? In Ray's attempt at vertical ascendancy, passing up a wall, with a guilelessly simple but effective form of technological support, perhaps *Plank Piece I-II* apes, so quietly as nearly to be missed, another act of wistful vertical lift-off on the world stage: the defining event of its historical moment, namely, the epochal 'Moon Shot' mission of 1969. If so, it speaks this relation with a muted, almost inscrutable, political tone. Perhaps *Plank Piece I-II* points (in almost embarrassingly small miniature) to the navel of the dream of the lunar landing: the Moon Shot was a jubilant accomplishment, echoed in Ray's almost childlike replication of the dream of corporeal ascendancy (indeed, the setup resembles a child's desultory fort); and it is manifested, too, as outrageous waste, a joke.

Project Apollo allowed two men to walk buoyant on the surface of the Moon on 20 July 1969. It was an incredible feat of technological mastery, and of neo-imperialistic white American, extra-terrestrial voyage, which staged the triumph of capitalism over communism (as culmination of the Russo-American 'Star Wars') (*plate 10*). Such criticisms of the Apollo programme were common. Of the rousing, hubristic nationalism of President John F. Kennedy's speeches on lunar flight, for example, Norman Mailer recalled, '[p]resumably, the moon was not listening, but if, in fact, she were the receiving and transmitting station of all lunacy, then she had not been ignoring the nation since'.[30] Mailer suggests that Kennedy's ambition to colonize the stars reflected, or indeed inaugurated, the excesses and irrationalities of the 1960s, in the interlude between Kennedy's presidential inauguration in 1961 and the Apollo 11 mission in 1969. Mailer summarizes the abject crises of the decade, and characterizes the lunar landing mission as its culmination and apotheosis:

> Four assassinations later; a war in Vietnam later; a burning of Black ghettos later; hippies, drugs and many student uprisings later; one Democratic Convention in Chicago seven years later; one New York school strike later; one sexual revolution later; yes, eight years of a dramatic, near-catastrophic, outright spooky decade later, we were ready to take the moon.[31]

The Moon Shot's nature as a nationalistic project of scandalous financial profligacy in a time of working-class privation and living-room war was registered most profoundly in Gil Scott-Heron's excoriating poem 'Whitey on the Moon', performed in 1970 and released the same year on his landmark record *Small Talk at 125 and Lenox: A New Black Poet*. From its opening lines, 'A rat done bit my sister Nell / (with Whitey on the moon)', Scott-Heron describes a banal but painful event in the life of an African American woman, and contrasts this with an event occurring simultaneously on (or above or beyond) the world stage, namely, the landing of a white man, Neil Armstrong, on the moon. The material reality of impoverishment is indexed in the poem along raced and



10 Astronaut Edwin E. Aldrin Jr, lunar module pilot of the first lunar landing mission, poses for a photograph beside the deployed United States flag during an Apollo 11 extravehicular activity on the lunar surface. AS11-40-5875 (20 July 1969). © United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Photo: Neil A. Armstrong.

classed lines, and is laced with subdued rage. The disparity between Nell and Neil's implied privilege is appalling: yet in comparison, Nell's experience is also symbolically trifling, even if painful (her face and arms begin to swell, her brother recounts). Scott-Heron wonders how she or he will afford to pay her doctor's bill, even though the cost pales in comparison to the extremity of the money eaten up by the neo-imperialist extravagance of the white dream of reaching the Moon.

An imaginative line can be drawn, I argue, between the Moon Shot and contemporary performance's levitations by plank, glue, meditation or leap of faith. Such a correlation overturns a seemingly natural order of value, to humiliate the given scale of human importance by drawing attention away from epochal themes to the properly human experience of the overlooked, the pathetic, the meagre, the failed.

Norman Bryson calls this the 'rhopographic' impulse: the desire to see, celebrate or perversely fetishize the small, the insignificant, or the base. He writes:

> From one point of view, the worldly scale of importance is deliberately assaulted by plunging attention downwards, forcing the eye to discover in the trivial base of life [those] intensities and subtleties which are normally ascribed to things of great worth; this is the descending movement, involving a humiliation of attention and of the self. From another point of view, the result is that what is valueless becomes priceless: by detaining attention in this humble milieu, [...] attention itself gains the power to transfigure the commonplace, and it is rewarded by being given objects in which it may find a fascination commensurate with its own discovered strengths.[32]

The rhopographic impulse is not reducible to the comedic labour of finding ways to humiliate oneself, or to draw sometimes narcissistic attention to the bare and exposed self. Ray's trivial acts of levitation, viewed rhopographically, dislodge attention from the grand developments of the immediate historical moment, so as to 'transfigure' and refocus it. In such a situation of adjacency or propinquity, the formal exercise commonly intuited in *Plank Piece I-II* is thrown into disarray, pushed to speak as contingent, unconscious reflex, or vague commentary, so to make thought happen.

Notably, it is performance – the lunatic fringe, the minor, rhopographic venture par excellence – that dislodges the fixities typically assumed for images. The fungibility between the performance of levitation and the attribution (or objective) of political efficacy seems obscure, though an example of its possibility was in fact articulated in the fabled attempt in 1967 by the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam to levitate the Pentagon. Led by activists Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and David Dellinger (three of the subsequent Chicago Seven), as many as 100,000 anti-war protestors circled the Pentagon and sought literally to levitate it (ideally to 300 feet), and spin it to blunt its five sharp points and exorcise it of its bloodlust, in a ritual of chanting, drums, collective dreaming, and pagan love.[33] 'There are seven million laws in this country,' Hoffman claimed, 'and we aim to break every single one of them, including the law of gravity.'[34]

To be sure, if it refers to the moment of its enactment, Ray's critical gesture is neither an excoriation (pace Goya) nor a public act of defiance (pace the Mobe), but a muffled kind of laughter, a prank or gag, so arcane, so rhopographically scaled, as to be practically a private joke among intimates or initiates. It resembles what it feels like to be *neutral*, to be against something but adrift in one's unfeeling, one's malaise; irritated by a scenario, but constitutionally blasé, unprincipled in one's ardour or one's anguish. Jacob Stewart-Halevy identifies this as a characteristic effect of the California conceptualism of Douglas Huebler, William Wegman, or Martha Rosler, namely, as a deadpan turn. For Stewart-Halevy, while deadpan is commonly seen as a 'psychic armor' characterized by 'the blasé attitude, neurasthenia, anomie, reterritorialized faciality' that modernity produces, in West Coast art it manifests as a strategic 'affective (non)response'.[35] California conceptualism was a tendency or mode Ray was arguably allied with in terms of sensibility and, after his move to Los Angeles later in the 1970s, geography. In deadpan aesthetics, Stewart-Halevy writes, 'the routine moves from impassive witnessing to interactional negligence; from acting stunned to pretending to be "checked out"', often muddying the impression of an artist's own competence or troubling a work's formal 'appropriateness to given registers of production'.[36] Negligence, incompetence, impassivity, laxity and levity are the arguable hallmarks

of the apparently casual affective register of Ray's early works. Deadpan refusals in the period were 'not antisocial but asocial, "checked out," a way of acting "out of face," so that it would be difficult to read [his] stance [...] and hold him accountable for it'.[37] Seen in this context, Ray can be seen as neither activist nor apolitical, but as affecting a politically careless or uncommitted sensibility that leaves his works liable to misapprehensions, discrepancies, and slippages of looking and reading.

Goya/Crash

In his recollected joke or slight, Ray names a perceived similarity between the formally austere *Plank Piece I-II* and the horrific spectacle of the 'aftermath of a car wreck or a Goya print'. This suggests a 'dynamic' contradiction at the core of the images. That is, if the works sought to demonstrate through performance an emotionally evacuated, non-illusionistic integration of body and object, the resulting assemblage cannot help but speak to broader situations of bodily crisis, especially when made in a historical moment of such explicit political and social transformation. While Ray once sought to distance the images from inferences of meaning, content, historicity, or effect (a project doomed to fail), *Plank Piece I-II* allows for an account of how the body – caught like a ragdoll in a sculptural enterprise – can never entirely evacuate or overcome a more human range of reference. Desire and difficulty flood the scene. This is also profoundly the case in the context of Ray's other explicitly performance-related works of the early 1970s, including sculptures that require simple but dangerous (and actually or potentially violent) activities to complete them: dropping a two-tonne wrecking ball to mangle a steel plate (*Untitled*, 1973); propping a six-foot stack of eight concrete blocks with a steel pole such that it stands on the verge of tipping outwards (*Untitled*, 1972); or crushing twenty long fluorescent strip lights with a falling steel weight (*Untitled*, *c.* 1972–73, *plate 11*). Such works

11 Charles Ray, *Untitled*, early 1970s. Steel plate and fluorescent light bulbs, dimensions variable. © Charles Ray. Photo: Matthew Marks Gallery.

use given or found, industrially produced, geometric forms (spheres, square planes, cuboid structures) and create powerful but crude situations of mutual interaction or distress. Such works tarry with the suddenness and noise of collisions, the unpredictable spatial reach prompted by the shattering impact of one distinct sculptural part upon the other, and the surprise of the event's intrusion upon the space of witness. Each invites an emotive relation (of shock, pain, confusion) to violence itself, prompting an encounter between the activity at hand and the broader situations of violence beyond it. It is tempting to see these broader situations as the war, or Kent State, perhaps, suggesting that Ray's own post-minimalist approach sought a kind of solution to the egregious disavowals Chave identified in minimalism. At the end of the decade, he created sculptures such as *In Memory of Sadat* (1981), an ambivalent homage to Anwar Sadat, the President of Egypt assassinated during a victory parade in October 1981. In this work, the body is inserted into a steel sculpture to blur the relations of resemblance and difference, subordination and dominance, between a living body and an inert object. Specifically, the performed assemblage disrupts the relation of similarity or dependence between a rectangular structure and an Egyptian sarcophagus by the visible arm and leg that seek to escape the sculpture. If *Plank Piece I-II* stages or narrates a kind of latent or actual violence, or death, it reminds us how performance is made to matter: a task that feels more pressing and perverse for the seeming meaninglessness, silliness and silence of Ray's enterprise and its images.

In his retrospective invocation of the car crash and the Goya print, Ray suggests two more profound directions in which, critically, to persist. As figures of horror and extremity, the car wreck and the violations of Goya's war are of strikingly different orders: the dailiness of the crash contrasts the direct unfamiliarity – for most – of the transgressions of war. More prosaically, Goya's print exists only as a series of representations, whereas the car wreck occurs firstly as immediate, as both a primary fact of life, as well as a mediated feature of fictions and traumatic recollections.

Ray made *Plank Piece I-II* in the same year that J. G. Ballard published *Crash*, his novella exploring group symphorophilia, the paraphilic state of finding erotic satisfaction in witnessing traumatic or tragic events unfold. Ballard's book was first published in June 1973, but it is not clear in which month Ray's action was photographed. Regardless, the relation sought here is not one of direct influence, appropriation, or genealogy, but of sympathetic coincidence, surprising allegiance, or consanguinity of mood. A symphorophiliac might set fire to a building for sexual kicks, consult a journal of surgery to aid masturbation, or achieve climax when passing the scene of a violent crime. *Crash*'s protagonists, Vaughan and Ballard, construct and share a highly specialized sexual identity: 'Trying to exhaust himself, Vaughan devised a terrifying almanac of imaginary automobile disasters and insane wounds', Ballard writes. 'For him, these wounds were the keys to a new sexuality born from a perverse technology. The images of these wounds hung in the gallery of his mind like exhibits in the museum of a slaughterhouse.'[38] Among prodigious ejaculations of semen and engine coolant on skin and car-seat vinyl, and spurred by the discovered consanguinity of ruptured steel chassis and dehiscent flesh, Ballard (the character) orchestrates his phantasmatic archetype: the death of Liz Taylor by automobile accident, as a willed scenario inside whose horrible lodestar majesty he might simultaneously orgasm and die. Misogynistic and puerile, *Crash* retains a critical edge in its pursuit of a vile synthesis between celebrity allure, hyper-mediatization (including that of politics) and outrageous violence. As such it both revels in and satirizes masculine bravado, as a series of spectacles in which the male subject dissolves in acts of great violence, eroticism, and technology. The repetitive allure of its images is pornographic in the

pure sense: as Michel Serres writes of watching accidents unfold, 'the essential thing remains: this need to start again, rerun, repeat, re-present the rite, the tragedy in which the dead do not play at dying but truly die'.[39]

In the light of Ray's recollection ('my friends laughed at me and said, "you idiot, it looks like the aftermath of a car wreck"') the simultaneous emergence of both *Plank Piece I-II* and *Crash* suggests less the influence of one text upon the other (*Plank Piece I-II* as adaptation or efflorescence of *Crash*, or vice versa) but rather the pervasiveness of the crash as a typology of experience in the sexually tumultuous, pervasively violent, technologized interregnum of the early 1970s.

In April 1970, a one-off exhibition by Ballard opened at New Arts Lab, an independent gallery in London: *Crashed Cars* involved the presentation of the wrecked chassis of cars (including an Austin Cambridge A60, Mini, Lincoln Continental, and Pontiac) as grisly readymades. At the private view, a female host wandered topless amid the wreckage, interviewing attendees on film. The combination of death, technology and eroticism reportedly provoked vehement, violent responses, for Ballard recalled the event culminating in vandalism against the exhibits, and an assault upon the topless host.[40] Eerily, Ray would turn to the car crash more directly in a later work that seemingly resembles and distils Ballard's *Crashed Cars*: Ray's *Unpainted Sculpture* (1997) consists of a meticulous replica of a totalled 1991 Pontiac Grand Am, which he reconstructed in fibreglass, and uniformly painted matt grey (despite the ironic white lie of its title) (*plate 12*).

To bring Ballard's techno-sadistic fable (and, implicitly, his exhibition) to bear upon the dynamic meaningfulness of Ray's dryer, archer *Plank Piece I-II* is to suggest a kind of violence in Ray's construction, as well as, oddly, a sexual dimension: namely, what Ballard calls 'the essence of the erotic delirium of the car-crash'.[41] Such a relation might be pushed to suggest a kind of politics, or even a model of social commentary. He depicts the car crash as a voyeuristic spectacle, even a theatrical one, which tests, accentuates, or explodes the regime of visuality governing bodies: living bodies; dead and dying bodies; bodies caught in unknowable scenes of corporeal disaster, forcible reconstitution, sexual congress, and misuse. Ballard writes,

> For a moment I felt that we were the principal actors at the climax of some grim drama in an unrehearsed theatre of technology, involving these crushed machines, the dead man destroyed in their collision, and the hundreds of drivers waiting beside the stage with their headlamps blazing.[42]

Ballard's allure is the desire one has for objects, in this instance, for cars and their paraphernalia, but in principle for any dead, mute thing, manipulable materials, art objects, into whose lineaments one injects love and ardour. Otherwise, Ballardian desire is the desire for other people but which can only be fulfilled when filtered through non-human proxies (fetishes), like rubberneckers visiting the scene of crash or crime. The practical difference is flimsy, for each desiring operation makes one's romance pathological, inverts the assumed hierarchy of human over non-human entities, and reduces the other to one among a network of consumable, destructible things. How might this effect imprint itself in Ray's images?

If *Plank Piece I-II* resembles a Goya print, the poses Ray takes up in his performed assemblages specifically index the hideous spectacles of 'Disasters of War', a series of eighty prints Goya made over a ten-year period between 1810 and 1820 in response to the perceived sadism and savagery of the Napoleonic occupation of Spain during the Peninsular War (1808–14), a famine in Madrid in which 20,000 people died (1811–12), and the oppressive, autocratic government of King Ferdinand VII (after 1812). In his

12 Charles Ray, *Unpainted Sculpture*, 1997. Painted fibreglass, 152 × 198 × 434 cm. © Charles Ray. Photo: Matthew Marks Gallery/Josh White.

gory sequence, which Alphonso Lingis calls 'the first great work of contemporary art', Goya used etching, lavis (brush metal intaglio) and drypoint to imagine the cruelty of torture, punishment, murder, and the desecration of corpses in war – both in the course of their undertaking by Napoleon's armies, as well as their gristly aftermaths.[43] Across bracingly violent images, we see stabbings, garrottes, hangings, and shootings; amputations, castrations and beheadings; women are raped; men are stripped and impaled anally upon tree trunks, crucified, or sawn in half at the genitals. In particular, the two bodily configurations in *Plank Piece I-II* are strikingly reminiscent of one of Goya's best-known etchings, *Great Deeds Against the Dead* (aka *A Heroic Feat! With Dead Men!*, or 'Grande hazaña! Con muertos!' in the original Spanish) (*plate 13*). In the etching, three corpses have been mutilated. A broken-down tree becomes a scaffold to which the naked and dismembered bodies are crudely lashed. At the centre, a muscular male corpse, bound at the waist, hands, and feet, with head bowed (and, so, defaced), is intact apart from a bloody smudge where the genitals have been cut away. To his left, another man is strung up by the feet such that his head and back lie crumpled at the foot of the tree. To the right, the third body hangs from the crooks behind the knees, bound to a bough by ropes. The head and arms have been amputated, and the genitals ruined with knives. The arms hang independent on the bough; the head, smiling in desolate repose, has been impaled on a torn branch. The visual effect is heinous, frenzied, ghastly.

If Ray's friends were reminded of Goya, they must have seen this etching in their minds' eyes: the image of Ray strung up at the knees is an uncanny mirror of the ravaged corpse in Goya's *Great Deeds*. The suspension of the body behind the knees is so odd, so rare, as to make the Goya print seem so obvious a reference point that Ray's action resembles a direct appropriation or faithful re-enactment. The partner portrayal of Ray collapsing at the waist even resembles – though imperfectly – the central body: their torsos are pitched forward, both are faceless, and their legs hang limp. In Goya's bone-dry satirical shade, Ray's statement of *Plank Piece I-II*'s definitive inability to enable affective depth or density (they 'have no meaning' and they 'denied any empathetic reading') seems brazen given that its constitutive images are forged in the shape of what Philip Shaw describes in Goya as an image of 'abjection at its most unsettling: the dismembered body as the formlessness to which society returns when the lawless brutality of the Real is allowed to overflow into reality'.[44] Moreover, Shaw points to the 'loathsome' possibility of a 'disturbingly erotic' charge to Goya's etching (and perhaps also to Ray's photographs), an effect that arises from the way Goya's scraping and gouging of the etching plate 'subject[s] the sacred to sadomasochistic defilement'.[45]

Reading *Plank Piece I-II* with *Great Deeds*, one notes the historical context in which the former was made: broadly, Ray's work was conceived and executed during the American war in Vietnam, and conspicuously in the same year, 1973, that the United States Army eventually withdrew from Vietnam, after an unpopular war that had persisted since 1955, two years after Ray's birth.[46] The war in Vietnam claimed the

13 Francisco de Goya, *Great Deeds Against the Dead* ('Grande hazaña! Con muertos!'), c. 1810–13, plate 39 from an unbound album of first edition impressions, 1863. Etching, wash and drypoint, 15.5 × 20.5 cm. London: British Museum (1975.1025.251). Photo: British Museum.

lives of over 58,000 American soldiers and upwards of 300,000 Vietnamese soldiers and civilians. Military conscription was a particular target of popular resentment and rage. Ray had become eligible for the draft lottery aged 19 in 1972, a year before he made *Plank Piece I-II* (although those born in 1952 were the last to be fully drafted). The war was waged through modern, industrialized methods: aerial warfare, carpet and cluster bombings, Agent Orange, Napalm – hellish means Mignon Nixon has described viscerally as 'industrial innovations' designed 'to flay and shred the skin of women, men, and children, even poisoning them before they could be born' and which 'were also engineered to economize on the expenditure of individual violence'.[47] Images of the horrors and spoils of war reached the US as never before, including most shockingly in popular reportage of the infamous My Lai massacre of 1968. Whistle blowers broke the story in the US in 1969; one of the perpetrators, Lieutenant William Calley, Jr, was convicted of mass murder in 1971. This contingency makes it attractive to read the apparent similarity to Goya's image of human wreckage as a suggestion of Ray's own address, however arcane or inscrutable, to the ongoing war.

The moment of the tail-end of the war in Vietnam was, notably, one in which performance art had already become a viable means of responding to the futility, unreason and unfairness of a war to which, regardless of its unpopularity, non-protesting American citizens at least tacitly (and often deliberately) consented, and whose exorbitance tax-paying citizens were bankrolling. Frazer Ward identifies the general public's acquiescence and countercultural resistance to the war as 'the unavoidable backdrop' to Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1970), undertaken three years prior to *Plank Piece I-II*.[48] In a critical encounter with the intuition that Burden's submission to a sharpshooter's bullet sustains a critical relation to the televised atrocities during and in protest against the war, Ward counsels against reading works of performance art too transparently in relation to real-world events: he argues that 'presenting *Shoot* as a homegrown version of Buddhist self-immolations [as anti-war protests], as seen on television, perhaps [...] ignores the art-historical and art-institutional issues to which Burden's performances were also tied'.[49] For Ward this includes Burden's critical debts to, and embodied modifications of, the transformation of spectatorship in minimalist sculpture, a familiar critical alibi for performance in the 1970s. However, he avoids cordoning acts of performance entirely from their historical moment of articulation, by allowing Burden's action to speak to more oblique historical contexts: beyond the war, in reading *Shoot* 'one might refer to the infamous Kitty Genovese case in New York in 1964, in which thirty-eight witnesses watched Ms. Genovese being attacked and killed', becoming 'a national media symbol for the failure of public responsibility', to contextualize the fact that no one saw fit to stop Burden's performance, despite its terminal risk.[50] For Ward, this is a grisly echo of the (in fact unproven, or at least exaggerated) lack of bystander response to the violent robbery, rape and murder of Catherine 'Kitty' Genovese, in a well-populated parking lot in Queens. In Ward's formulation, *Shoot* refers both to the national drama of war, and its transformation of the politics of pain, injury, and death, as well as – on a more intimate scale – to the historically contingent problem of how viewers of events of objectification or dehumanization feel compelled or inhibited in their responses (the so-called 'bystander effect').

To the extent that *Plank Piece I-II* may refer to the war, the Moon Shot, or other traumatic content of the historical moment, its tone of address is profoundly ambivalent, noncommittal and low in stakes. As Martin Herbert writes in relation to Ray's contemporary, Christopher D'Arcangelo, the zeitgeist of the mid-1970s was that of a 'vestigial countercultural revolution', as the spirit of the moment was one of

political exhaustion, especially with regard to the war in Vietnam; he characterizes the politics of art in this period as split between, on one hand, 'punk nihilism' as 'a holdover belief in the revolutionary creation of a new society' and on the other, 'the evolving cultural favoring of going "blank"', as performed by artists disillusioned by the realpolitik of art as a tactic for supposed social intervention or change.[51] As a stance of passive obstinacy, the latter seems to complement Ray's sensibility. If *Plank Piece I-II* still reminds us of mortal horror, its images do so by way of accident or because the horror is latent. Either way, meaning is laid down in or laid low by the images. It is there as historical contingency, allegory or associative fantasy, mindless happenstance, or propinquity, as one thing next to another, provoking its own occultation.

Offering relations between Burden and Ray, however, suggests the privilege and ontological safety of both artists' poses of political ambivalence (or, for some, vacuity). Kellie Jones articulates this conflict in a striking comparison between two apparent responses to the dailiness and deadliness of automobile accidents: Burden's *Dead Man* and the African American artist David Hammons's *Murder Mystery (Spade Run Over by a Volkswagen)*, both staged in Los Angeles in 1972. Hammons's *Murder Mystery* is a performance installation that depicts a Black body crushed by a car, through Hammons's act of parking the wheel of a black Volkswagen Beetle on a mimeographed cut-out of a 'spade', painted with a splatter of cartoon blood. In *Dead Man*, Burden's performance involved him lying on the street next to a car, covered by a tarpaulin: he appears to be the corpse of someone run over by a car, or else he has been mortally assaulted on the street. Jones argues that both works 'form part of a dialogue about a national body framed by violence in an urban space and the use of creative endeavours to comment on and intervene in that situation'.[52] Yet, this mutuality is belied by the fact that while Hammons retreats into obfuscating layers of mediation, and therefore towards a more profound inscrutability, Burden 'was *privileged* to be able to use his own body in such self-inflicted acts of violence' – even if he was arrested for his disturbance. Burden was acquitted after the jury failed to reach a verdict on the extent of his transgression, perhaps confirming Burden's apparent unassailability in and beyond performance.[53] Like Burden, perhaps, Ray's divestiture of hermeneutic clarity and direct historical reference may be sophisticated or blasé but can also be seen as a sign of the racial and gendered privilege that enables such poses for the white male artistic subject.

In his statements, Ray is not entirely resistant to the imaginative implantation of meaning and content in his works. He tells Calvin Tomkins, 'it's not that I reject subject matter [...]. But I didn't want my things riding into the room on a Freudian surfboard. [...] The psychological is real, but it's non-sculptural.'[54] Indeed, Ray's work is obviously less overt in its political responsiveness than much performance art of its moment. For example, the work of Ray's peer Ana Mendieta, whose *Moffitt Building Piece* and *Untitled (Rape Scene)* of 1973 were both made in the same year as *Plank Piece I-II*, directly referenced and worked through the murder of Sara Jane Ottens. Ottens was a nursing student at the University of Iowa, which both Mendieta and Ray were attending.[55] Yet when *Plank Piece I-II* reminds Ray and his friends of a car crash or a Goya print, it is because despite the best efforts of the artist to keep meaning moving, or to allow it to remain 'dynamic', mobile and indefinable rather than fully asemic, the transfiguration of a human body into a sculptural material or artefact brings with it unwieldly effects. It dramatizes the familiar but perverse effect by which we desire objects, or want other bodies through intermediary objects; and it theatricalizes the violence that transforms living bodies into violated things, in sexual assault, torture or murder (Goya's coldly ironicized 'great deeds'). The scandal of *Plank Piece I-II* is our attraction to the impassive body integrated into each assemblage, an odd admixture

of empathy for his pain and attraction to his masochistic endurance. It exploits, but subtly, our own sadistic pleasure in watching, while asking us to reckon with the sequential romance of scenes of human endurance, abnegation, and death.

By attempting to write with *Plank Piece I-II*, and through its apparent historical contiguities (the Moon, the crash, the war), meaning and effect are not sought in the work, but wishfully channelled towards its anomalous, beguiling activity. Hal Foster proposes an archival impulse in art and its writing to name the desire to bring one idea, practice or event to bear upon a seemingly disparate set of correlates. He describes as 'archival' a non-totalizing fantasy of connection, 'a wish to relate – to probe a misplaced past, to collate some of its traces, to ascertain what remains for the present'.[56] Making such 'new orders of affective association' in writing can, for Foster, be productive, enigmatic, melancholic, provisional, 'anomic' (lawless) or absurd – or paranoid, 'for what is paranoia if not a practice of forced connections [...] put on display?'[57] Posing Ray's early work as an archival trace (rather than an archival practice), the events in its milieu suggest not the paranoid 'truth' of *Plank Piece I-II*, but a tone or imperative at work in Ray's crude dream of levitation or flight: the attempt to float free, of the world, of oneself, and the banal, embodied reality of being prone to laws, constitutionally precarious, and immune to transcendence. The drama of life here is that of one forever subject to human limits: of one's ability, agility, imagination, or unfreedom or, with bathos, as constrained by mere gravity.

Notes

The author thanks Morgan Canavan (Charles Ray Studio), Charles Ray and Matthew Marks Gallery for providing reproductions, permissions, and access to research materials.

1 Calvin Tomkins refers to 'a fellow student' at the University of Iowa taking the photographs. See Calvin Tomkins, 'Meaning Machines: The Sculptures of Charles Ray', *New Yorker*, 11 May 2016, 54–63, 58.

2 Patrizia di Bello, 'Seductions and Flirtations: Photographs, Histories, Theories', *Photographies*, 2: 1, September 2008, 143–155, 151.

3 Charles Ray in Bruce W. Ferguson, *Charles Ray*, Malmö, 1994, 30.

4 Much has been written about the affective and ontological promises and limits of endurance-based performance. See, for example: Cindy Nemser, 'Subject-Object: Body Art', *Arts Magazine*, September 1971, 14–17; Thomas McEvilley, 'Art in the Dark', *Artforum*, 21: 10, Summer 1983, 62–71; Karen Gonzalez Rice, *Long Suffering: American Endurance Art as Prophetic Witness*, Ann Arbor, 2016; and Lara Shalson, *Performing Endurance: Art and Politics since 1960*, Cambridge, 2018.

5 Frazer Ward, 'Some Relations between Conceptual and Performance Art', *Art Journal*, 56: 4, Winter 1997, 36–40, 36.

6 Charles Ray in Joshua Reiman, 'The Space In Between: A Conversation with Charles Ray', *Sculpture*, July–August 2015, 38–45, 41.

7 Jon Thompson, 'Piero Manzoni: Out of Time and Place', in *The Collected Writings of Jon Thompson*, London, 2011, 299–311, 299.

8 See 'A Conversation with Charles Ray and Toby Kamps', The New Social Experiment #199, *Brooklyn Rail*, 21 December 2020: https://brooklynrail.org/events/2020/12/21/a-conversation-with-charles-ray-and-toby-kamps/

9 Heather Diack, *Documents of Doubt: The Photographic Conditions of Conceptual Art*, Minneapolis and London, 2020, 6–9.

10 Diack, *Documents of Doubt*, 9.

11 Peter Schjeldahl, 'No Offense', *New Yorker*, 8 March 2010, 80–81, 80.

12 Kelly Baum, 'Patterns', in Kelly Baum and Brinda Kumar, *Charles Ray: Figure Ground*, New Haven and New York, 2022, 18. The publication accompanied Ray's retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 2022.

13 Controversy erupted over two public monuments in particular. *Boy With Frog* (2009) was removed from its permanent site at Punta della Dogana, Venice in 2013; and *Huck and Jim* (2014), a racially and sexually charged portrait of Huckleberry Finn and the escaped slave, Jim, was commissioned by the Whitney Museum of Modern Art, New York for its public plaza, but rejected for fears of offending museumgoers. The three reconstructions referred to in parentheses are *Unpainted Sculpture* (1997), *Tractor* (2005), and *Hinoki* (2007), which each involve casting and meticulously fabricating to size a large found object, in painted fibreglass, aluminium, and Japanese cypress, respectively.

14 Donna De Salvo, 'Where We Begin: Opening the System, c.1970', in *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c.1970*, ed. De Salvo, London, 2005, 10–23, 20.

15 Anne M. Wagner, 'Life and Death in the Work of Charles Ray', in *Charles Ray: Sculpture 1997–2014*, Ostfildern, 2014, 25–55, 32.

16 Serra's props are weighted by the death of Raymond Johnson. A rigger-mover, Johnson was killed when *Sculpture No. 3* collapsed at the Walker Arts Centre in Minneapolis in November 1971, due to faulty manufacturing of grooves in the propped steel plates.

17 Anne M. Wagner, 'Sculpture after Sculpture', *Artforum*, 53: 6, February 2015, 226–227, 226.

18 Anna C. Chave, 'Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power', *Arts*, 64: 5, January 1990, 44–63, 51, 44.

19 Wagner, 'Life and Death', 33.

20 Baum, 'Patterns', 11–29, 14.

21 On this problem in the critical framing of conceptual performance, see my 'Rudimentary Things: Becoming an Object in the Performances of Skip Arnold', *Art History*, 43: 3, June 2020, 538–563.

22 Michael Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws: Sala, Ray, Marioni, Gordon*, New Haven, 2011, 72–73.

23 Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 73.

24 Dennis Cooper, 'Charles Ray', *Grand Street*, 59, Winter 1997, 23–34, 24.

25 Peter Adey, *Levitation: The Science, Myth and Magic of Suspension*, London, 2017, 184.

26 Constance Lewallen, 'Terry Fox: Performance in San Francisco', in *Terry Fox: Elemental Gestures*, Dortmund, 2015, 24–38, 30.

27 On Byars' *Introduction* as performed sculpture, see my 'Delete the Idea Down: James Lee Byars and the Performance of Abbreviation', *Art Journal*, 80: 2, Summer 2021, 30–53, 36–38.

28 Anon., 'Traffic is Flexible Work of Art', *The Free People*, 15 August 1979, 5. Clipping provided by Marjoca de Greef, Estate of Franklin Aalders, Amsterdam.

29 Anon., '"Sticker" Protests', *The Free People*, 26 September 1978, 5. Clipping provided by Marjoca de Greef, Estate of Franklin Aalders, Amsterdam.
30 Norman Mailer, *A Fire on the Moon*, London, 1970, 4. Kennedy's inauguration speech of 20 January 1961 famously included the pledge, 'Together let us explore the stars'. His first sustained speech on the lunar mission was the broadly militaristic 'Moon Shot speech', presented to Congress on 25 May 1961, six weeks after the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to enter the Earth's orbit; followed by the public 'Address at Rice University on the Nation's Space Effort' (commonly referred to by its central phrase, 'We Choose to Go to the Moon') on 12 September 1962.
31 Mailer, *A Fire on the Moon*, 4.
32 Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, London, 2013, 64.
33 See the remarkable account in Adey, *Levitation*, 221–224.
34 Cited in Adey, *Levitation*, 223.
35 Jacob Stewart-Halevy, 'California Conceptualism's About-Face', *October*, 163, Spring 2018, 71–101, 72.
36 Stewart-Halevy, 'California Conceptualism's About-Face', 73.
37 Stewart-Halevy, 'California Conceptualism's About-Face', 79.
38 J. G. Ballard, *Crash*, London, 2014, 6.
39 Michel Serres, *Statues: The Second Book of Foundations*, trans. Randolph Burks, London, 2015, 4.
40 Ballard cited in V. Vale and Andrea Juno, *J. G. Ballard*, San Francisco, 1984, 154.
41 Ballard, *Crash*, 8–9.
42 Ballard, *Crash*, 13.
43 Alphonso Lingis, 'The Torturers and their Public', *South Central Review*, 24: 1, Spring 2007, 91–94, 92.
44 Philip Shaw, 'Abjection Sustained: Goya, the Chapman Brothers and the *Disasters of War*', *Art History*, 26: 4, September 2003, 479–504, 487.
45 Shaw, 'Abjection Sustained', 488.
46 The US agreed a ceasefire in January 1973, though the war between North and South Vietnam continued until 1975.
47 Mignon Nixon, 'Anatomic Explosion on Wall Street', *October*, 142, Fall 2012, 3–25, 23.
48 Frazer Ward, 'Gray Zone: Watching *Shoot*', *October*, 95, Winter 2001, 114–130, 128.
49 Ward, 'Gray Zone', 119–120.
50 Ward, 'Gray Zone', 124, n. 25.
51 Martin Herbert, *Tell Them I Said No*, Berlin, 2016, 84.
52 Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*, Durham, NC and London, 2017, 238.
53 Jones, *South of Pico*, 237.
54 Cited in Tomkins, 'Meaning Machines', 60.
55 In 1973, Ray was enrolled as an undergraduate, while Mendieta was an MFA student in the Multimedia programme; both were mentored by Hans Breder.
56 Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, London, 2017, 59.
57 Foster, *Bad New Days*, 60.