



**KIENHOLZ**  
**BERLIN | HOPE**







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## INTRODUCTION

by Peter Goulds

The 1970s were an important decade for Kienholz. They established the international recognition of Ed Kienholz as one of the most innovative and pioneering American artists to have emerged during the post-war years. The decade commences with the completion of the tableau *Five Car Stud*, 1969–72,<sup>1</sup> possibly Ed's opus as a solo artist. Ed leaves Los Angeles with his new wife and their developing family. The decade ends with the making of *Sollie 17*, 1979–80,<sup>2</sup> and Ed's declaration that all work by Kienholz, from 1972 onwards, should be considered collaborative and co-authored with Nancy Reddin Kienholz.

Our exhibition, focused on the '70s, has been selected from works other than tableaux made by Kienholz in the two studios subsequently established—in Northern Idaho, to where they first moved with their families in 1973, and Berlin, where they additionally settled in the same year. Ed and Nancy divided their time thereafter between the US and Europe.

As an artist arriving in Los Angeles in 1951, Ed had always worked from his home, in the yard, a converted garage, or upon first visiting Berlin, from a large apartment on Meinekestrasse. The Kienholzes' move to a substantial property on Lake Pend Oreille in Hope, Idaho, 40 miles from the Canadian border and 15 miles from Montana, enabled the construction of a custom studio based on their past experience, and built by Ed, his family and local assistants, to suit their needs. The construction materials from the building site,



together with found objects garnered from swap meets, and fueled by the notion that an artist's studio is incomplete without a painting easel, gave birth to the White Easel series of formal three-dimensional wall relief paintings. The importance of drawing, present in all of Kienholz, is never more clearly expressed. In time, the studio building and other structures on the Kienholz compound, would be signed, dated and as such determined by the artists to be works of art.

*The Volksempfänger* series were made in response to Ed and Nancy's first visits to Berlin's flea markets. It was there that they discovered "people's radios," which were distributed during the 1930s by Goebbels with the Nazi propaganda machine for the conveyance of their evil messages and the indoctrination of the German-speaking nation. Through these poignant works, the Kienholz narrative goes on to lament the Nazi distortion of history and the subsequent plight of innocent refugees, manifested from both sides of this human conflict. Specific choices of music from Wagner's *Ring* cycle were appropriated to characterize and personalize each of *The Volksempfänger*. Clearly, formal lessons have been incorporated into *The Volksempfänger* from the experience of the White Easel series of abstract compositions and mark-making.

The White Easel and *Volksempfänger* series have not been seen together before or since certain selections were made for the Whitney Retrospective, which traveled to Los Angeles and Berlin, and they have not been considered as collective bodies of works for over 30 years.

We are very grateful to the Kienholz studio assistants, Tom Preiss and Rich Post, who worked with the Kienholzes in Berlin and Idaho respectively, for their thoughtful and insightful personal reflections. Our appreciation is also extended to the art historian David Anfam who, in response to his enthusiasm for Kienholz and these works in particular, dropped everything he was doing to provide a fresh perspective.

We are most grateful to Nancy Reddin Kienholz for permitting L.A. Louver to present this unique exhibition, and to her current studio assistants Daryl and Sherry Witcraft for making it possible. It is with much pleasure that I extend particular thanks to our colleagues in Europe at Galerie Lelong for their trust. I also would like to recognize our staff and the Directors of L.A. Louver for providing all that is necessary, in every way possible, to organize such a committed exhibition.

Peter Goulds

Founding Director, L.A. Louver

<sup>1</sup> Edward Kienholz, *Five Car Stud*, 1969–1972, mixed media installation, dimensions variable. The tableau was first seen at *Documenta V* (curated by Harald Szeemann), Kassel, Germany in 1973, and then at *Monumente*, a group exhibition organized by the Kunsthalle Dusseldorf, Germany later that year. The work would not be seen again publicly until 2011 in the exhibition *Edward Kienholz: Five Car Stud 1969–72, Revisited*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, which traveled to Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark in 2012. *Five Car Stud* resides in the permanent collection of the Fondazione Prada, Milan, Italy.

<sup>2</sup> Edward & Nancy Reddin Kienholz, *Sollie 17*, 1979–80, mixed media assemblage, 10 × 28 × 14 ft. (3 × 8.5 × 4.3 m). *Sollie 17* exhibited extensively from 1981–1997, including: Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; International Sculpture Center, Washington D.C.; and L.A. Louver, Venice, CA (1981); Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA and Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH (1982); Touchstone Center for the Visual Arts, Spokane, Washington; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; and Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX (1984); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN and Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, IL (1985); Detroit Institute of the Arts, MI and Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (1986); Stadtische Kunsthalle Dusseldorf, Germany and Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, Austria (1989); Sonje Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea (1994); and in the *Kienholz Retrospective*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; MOCA, Los Angeles; and Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, Germany (1996–1997). The tableau belongs to the collection of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

*I have long been convinced that my artistic ideal stands or falls with Germany*  
—Richard Wagner

*...no ideas but in things*  
—William Carlos Williams

*I can see the result of ideas in what is thrown away by a culture*  
—Edward Kienholz

**LIVING ROOM**  
by David Anfam

Have a mere two words lifted from the trajectory of any artist's career resonated more than "Berlin" and "Hope?" 4,870 miles apart, these place names are like the emotional extremities standing at either limit of Ed Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's art. On a factual level, of course Berlin is the city to which the Kienholzes moved in 1973, whereas Hope, Idaho, was the tiny hamlet that they chose to begin to establish their first proper studio in the same year. Henceforth, the Kienholzes would spend six months a year in each location. The two main bodies of work they created in this period evince the tug of both sites—straddling Old World angst and a quintessential American ardor for venturing afresh into uncharted territory

*The Volksempfänger*s made in West Berlin are heavy with the weight of Germany's troubled history. On the other hand, the White Easel series, catalyzed by the new workplace, is more formal and detached. However, the nightmarish era that the former group evokes represents the underside to the latter's new beginnings. Running throughout is a double-edged logic typical of the Kienholzes' larger vision. In their universe, time past perturbs the future (witness the title of the atomic bomb-shaped *The Future as an Afterthought*), the mechanistic grows humanoid (for example, air conditioning vents replace the figures' mouths in *The Art Show*) and the *heimish* turns uncanny (the German translation, *unheimlich*, literally means un-homely). We might even think Germany was the dark mother, by way of *The Volksempfänger*s' gestation,

to the brighter White Easels. Significantly, lumpy industrial-type lights in the first mostly become more graceful fixtures in the second, enhanced by the background white wall plane—emulating the studio’s cinder blocks—and the shiny sheets of zinc-galvanized steel. As elsewhere in the Kienholzes’ scheme, metamorphosis is everything. Flotsam and jetsam from flea markets or their studio space behave as if, to rephrase William Carlos Williams’s famous dictum, ideas only come alive in things.

Is it coincidence, then, that Richard Wagner should have counted among the greatest artistic masters of metamorphosis? Developing, transforming and inverting his musical elements, Wagner breathed life into the erstwhile impersonal fabric of sound as did no earlier composer; in his stagecraft, the leitmotif substitutes for a person or a thought. Furthermore, as one historian of ideas remarks, “By filleting drama of motive and presenting it almost entirely in terms of emotional response Wagner shows things acting on people but not people acting on things.”<sup>1</sup> The Kienholzes’ sculptures convey a comparable impulse, as the detritus of the world—whether old clocks, Nazi-era radio sets or home fire screens—exerts an insidious sway. It reifies the living into mannequins or freezes them as photographic memories. Entities that were once discarded or forgotten return as ominous props in cryptic, frozen allegories. Resin or bronze casting finishes the embalming process. By contrast, the kind of music from *Der Ring des Nibelungen* issuing from *The Volksempfänger* famously weaved its animated magic over human hearts and minds. No wonder Adolf Hitler and his Party venerated Bayreuth, nor did Wagner fail to identify totally with his newly unified nation. Simply said (with a nod to Susan Sontag), Wagner has been as fascinating to many as Fascism. And the particular Wagnerian passage that the radios of *The Kitchen Table* play drops an intriguing clue.

What we hear when beholding the deceptively quotidian *Kitchen Table* comes from Act 1, Scene 1 of *Siegfried* wherein the hero forges his magic sword. Lest this detail sound far-fetched, another *Volksempfänger* bears the title *Notung*—the very name of the weapon. At the scene’s end, the sword is strong enough to smash the anvil upon which Siegfried crafted it. Read proleptically (as perhaps the Kienholzes did), a cautionary tale lurks about power out of control that is all too relevant to events in Nazi Germany.

More subtly, an implicit Teutonic chain reaction of associations is also sparked. Hitler’s Third Reich built upon workaday might laid by Bismarck’s Prussia: the heavy industry that fuelled the nation’s meteoric rise in the 19th century. Bismarck’s exhortation to the Prussian Parliament encapsulated it. “Not through speeches and majority decisions will the great questions of the day be decided . . . but by iron and blood (*Eisen und Blut*).” Iron was the life’s blood of the Ruhr industries that made Hitler’s munitions and whose owners helped finance his elevation



Fig. 1. Anselm Kiefer, *Eisen-Steig (Iron Path)*, 1986  
oil, acrylic, olive branches, lead, iron, golf leaf and emulsion on canvas  
86% × 149% × 11 in. (220 x 380 × 27.9 cm)

and ensuing tyranny. Indeed, the Ruhr-based Siemens and other companies manufactured *The Volksempfänger*s. From Bismarck's "iron and blood" to Nazism's "blood and soil" was but a short step. A tableau such as Anselm Kiefer's *Iron Path* (Fig. 1) allows us to grasp the triangulation between iron, earth and the Holocaust—not to mention how prescient the Kienholzes were in their critical perceptions. As Kiefer would note in 1990, "We see train tracks somewhere, and think about Auschwitz."<sup>2</sup> We hear Wagner coming from *The Volksempfänger*s and think of the love-death to which Kultur led the German people in 1939–45. Should any doubt remain, *Der Ofenschirm* adds the missing element whereby the earth (ore) metamorphoses into iron and steel: fire. Whatever flames these hearth screens guarded, they are about as homely as another image of European evil running amok, Max Ernst's bitterly ironic *Fireside Angel* (1937).



Fig. 2. Ed Kienholz, *History as a Planter*, 1961  
wood, metal, paper, paint, soil, plant  
(Wandering Jew), and aluminum container  
33 × 18<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 12<sup>2</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (83.82 × 47.31 × 31.43 cm)

Apart from the iron cross that decorates *Brünnhilde* and similar overt emblems, other elements in *The Volksempfänger*s buttress their sly palimpsest of allusions to the diabolical "German Question." The light bulbs bring to mind the one that presides over Picasso's anti-fascist *Guernica*, as well as the Nazis' spectacular choreography of public illuminations, climaxing in the so-called Cathedral of Light at the 1937 Nuremberg Rally. Those massed searchlights thrust heavenwards—"Mehr Licht," as it were, with a vengeance—as resolutely as the bulbs and their electrical cords in *The Volksempfänger*s sway like limp straws in the wind (since some also have a spermatozoa-like appearance, a phallic pun is not inconceivable). In turn, washboards and the baby positioned before the rightward one in *Notung* riff on the Nazis' injunction for women (Aryan ones) to stay untainted and bear children ("Kinder, Kirche, Küche"). Yet a saw tooth weapon in front and a swastika on the medal above this vulnerable little innocent lends a murderous edge—*History as a Planter* (Fig. 2) had already sealed the thought of massacre with its Wandering Jew plant atop an oven. Similarly, the talons of the *Reichsadler* claw from the base of the radio in *Der Zementkasten*. Encasing this radio in cement trumps the grim message of the whole ensemble. It simultaneously implies the toxic waste that the devices broadcast and materializes the claustrophobia of these set pieces, especially given the drawers that entomb their contents. As such, we might think of Francis Bacon's paintings (Fig. 3) to understand that entrapment and enclosure lay somewhere near the crux of Nazism—from its concentration camps to the Berlin bunker and even Eichmann's ultimate glass-encased captivity in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> *The Volksempfänger*s constitute a rebus of fragments excavated from the ruins of a culture (ponder the Kienholz quotation in this essay's epigraph).



Fig. 3. Francis Bacon, *Study for a Portrait*, 1949  
oil on canvas, 58<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 51<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (149.4 × 130.6 cm)

They are ersatz, residual, morbid living rooms.

Cut forward a mere year or so to the White Easel series. Figuratively and literally, we confront a brighter world. For a start, expansiveness rather than claustrophobia fuelled their genesis. The ceiling of the Kienholzes' new studio in Hope was extremely high (over 20 feet tall) and the area itself felt vast to them. Constructing an easel in it was a means to anchor themselves, establishing a fresh matrix. Moreover, in a trope as least as venerable as the young Rembrandt's self-portrayal in his bare studio (Fig. 4), the emptiness of the easel (turned away from us in the latter) boded future possibilities compared to the overtones of closure and nemesis ubiquitous in *The Volksempfänger*s. The first piece in the group was *The Fountain*. Its title speaks volumes. Where once the antennae of *The Volksempfänger*s had metaphorically drawn noxious vapors from the

ether, water is an age-old symbol of life.

Those wiry antennae gave a bestial tinge to the assemblages, as if they were horns or lupine ears pricked to scent a prey,<sup>4</sup> whereas the animal part intruding into *The Fountain* comes from that most benign and loveable of plodding herbivores, the elephant. The altered photograph that caps the stand in *Die Nornen* had been of people on their way to church who look more like refugees (Ed thought the man in the middle could have been crippled in the war and associated the scene with the entry of the doomed gods into Valhalla): the equivalent in *White Easel with Face* shows young seated American men bonding at a street corner. The retro chrome roller towel dispenser in *White Easel with Wooden Hand* still gleams, while the lights above it are focused. Washboards abrade; towels gently sanitize. Even some of the metal used in the group stems from a source of security and bounty, a bank and its stalwart doors. In other words, hope proverbially sprang eternal in Hope.



Fig. 4. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Artist in his Studio*, about 1628  
oil on panel, overall: 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (24.8 × 31.7 cm)

Above all, by making their own workplace into a subject that doubles as a calculated retort to Minimalism too, the Kienholzes stamped an implicit Yankee “can do” mood on the White Easels. There could even be the subtlest nod to René Magritte’s *The Human Condition* (Fig. 5) — arguably the most memorable depiction of an easel in art — insofar as a metaphysics of absence or potential fills the 4 × 4-inch timbers. True, old signs of menace linger, especially the weapon in *White Easel with Machine Pistol*. Also, are the wooden poles in *White Easel with Face* a coded reference to a much older European wood that, according to the historian Tacitus, defeated the Romans? If so, then these lithe sticks still step lightly away from Germania. Perhaps most crucially, the White Easels possess the playful character of works in progress. They declare a space in which to create, live and thrive — albeit not without a final, typical and pungent sting. For the Kienholzes could scarcely have been unaware that *Lebensraum* was a double-edged sword.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 5. René Magritte, *La condition humaine* (*The Human Condition*), 1933  
oil on canvas, overall: 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 31<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (100 × 81 × 1.6 cm)

David Anfam is Commissioning Editor-at-Large for Fine Art at Phaidon Press, London, and Senior Consulting Curator and Director of the Research Center at the Clyfford Still Museum, Denver. His many books and catalogs over the past three decades include studies of Abstract Expressionism, Color Field Painting, Jackson Pollock, Howard Hodgkin, Gary Hume, Brice Marden and Anish Kapoor. Anfam also wrote the seminal *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas — A Catalogue Raisonné* (Yale University Press, 1998) and is currently organizing a focus exhibition around Jackson Pollock’s epochal Mural (1943).

<sup>1</sup> Magee, Bryan. *Aspects of Wagner*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1988: 14. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Biro, Matthew. *Anselm Kiefer*. London & New York: Phaidon Press, 2013: 46. Print.

<sup>3</sup> See Hammer, Martin. *Francis Bacon and Nazi Propaganda*. London: Tate Publishing, 2012. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Curiously, as I learnt from my parents, the British nicknamed their World War II-era radios “cat’s whiskers” on account of the thin wires within them that formed part of the apparatus’s crystal detectors.

<sup>5</sup> Hitler explicitly based his malign policy of *Lebensraum* on the Americans’ precedent of the colonization of the continental United States.







**THE KITCHEN TABLE**

1975-1977

***THE VOLKSEMPFÄNGERS***

1975-1976

**THE WHITE EASEL SERIES**

1977-1979



**THE KITCHEN TABLE**

*(transitional version)*, 1975–77

mixed media and bronze

41 ½ × 67 × 21 ¼ in. (105.4 × 170.2 × 54 cm)



Music: *Siegfried*, Act I, Scene 1,  
Siegfried and Mime: “Zwangvolle Plage! Müh ohne Zweck...”



**THE KITCHEN TABLE**

(bronze version), 1975–1977

mixed media and bronze

41 ½ x 67 x 21 ¾ in. (105.4 x 170.2 x 55.2 cm)



Music: *Siegfried*, Act I, Scene 1,  
Siegfried and Mime: “Zwangvolle Plage! Müh ohne Zweck...”



Details of *The Kitchen Table* (transitional version) and *The Kitchen Table* (bronze version)





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**Edward & Nancy Reddin Kienholz**  
*The Kitchen Table (transitional version), 1975-77*  
mixed media and bronze  
42 x 21 1/4 x 67 in. (106.7 x 54 x 170.2 cm)



Video: *The Kitchen Table (transitional version), 1975-1977*

**DER OFENSCHIRM / THE FIRE SCREEN, 1975**

mixed media assemblage

61 ¼ × 39 ½ × 17 ¾ in. (155.6 × 100.3 × 45.1 cm)



Music: *Die Walküre*, Act III, Scene 3, the end,  
Wotan: "Leb wohl, du kühnes, herrliches Kind"









Video: *Der Ofenschirm/The Fire Screen*, 1975



**DER ZEMENTKASTEN / THE CEMENT BOX, 1976**

mixed media assemblage

70 1/2 x 29 5/8 x 18 in. (179.1 x 75.2 x 45.7 cm)



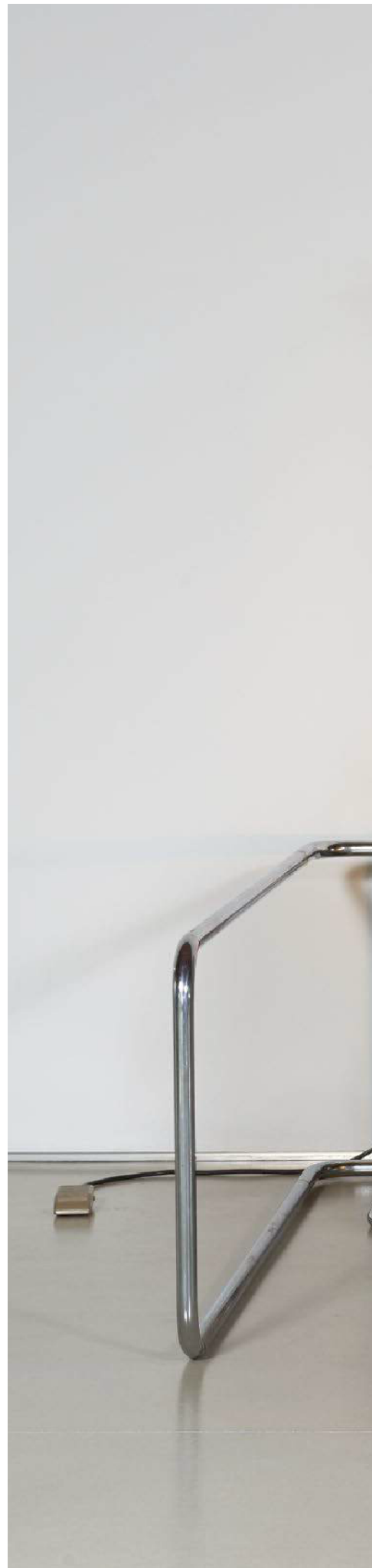
Music: *Siegfried*, Act II, Scene 2,  
"Waldweben" and Fafner as Dragon: "Was ist da?"



**NOTUNG**, 1976  
mixed media assemblage  
73 3/4 × 70 3/4 × 75 1/2 in. (187 × 180 × 192 cm)



Music: *Die Walküre*, Act II, Scene 2,  
Siegmund, Sieglinde and Hunding:  
“Zauberfest bezähmt ein Schlaf...”











**BRÜNNHILDE**, 1976  
mixed media assemblage  
61 ½ × 41 ¾ × 18 in. (156 × 106 × 46 cm)



Music: *Die Walküre*, Act II, Scene 1,  
Brünnhilde: "Hojotoho! Hojotoho!"  
*Götterdämmerung*, Act III, Scene 3,  
Brünnhilde: "Starke Scheite schichtet mir dort"







**DIE NORNEN / THE NORNS, 1976**

mixed media assemblage

61 ½ × 115 ¾ × 61 ½ in. (156.2 × 294 × 156.2 cm)



Music: *Das Rheingold*, Scene 2,  
Leitmotiv of Walhalla, Fricka and Wotan:  
“Wotan, Gemahl! erwache!”  
*Götterdämmerung*, Prelude,  
The Norns: “Welch Licht leuchert dort?”;  
Act III, Scene 3, the very end.











Video: *Die Nornen/The Norns*, 1976

**THE FOUNTAIN, 1977**  
mixed media assemblage  
96 ¾ × 65 × 22 ½ in. (245.7 × 165.1 × 57.2 cm)



**WHITE EASEL WITH FACE, 1977**

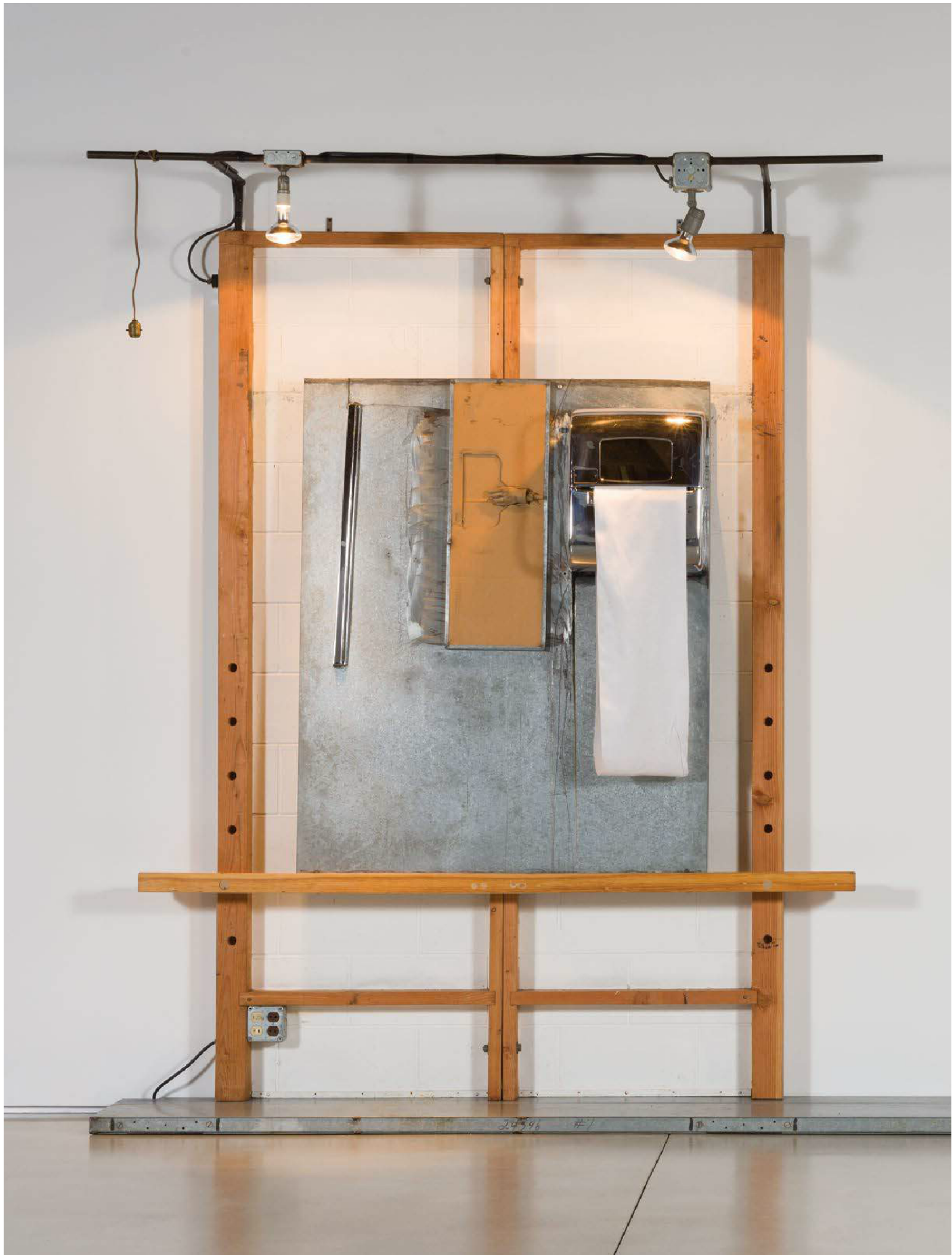
mixed media assemblage

110 × 84 × 25 ½ in. (279.4 × 213.4 × 64.8 cm)











**WHITE EASEL WITH WOODEN HAND, 1978**  
mixed media assemblage  
105 × 182 × 28 in. (266.7 × 462.3 × 71.1 cm)





**WHITE EASEL WITH MACHINE PISTOL**, 1979  
mixed media assemblage  
96 ½ × 90 × 35 ¾ in. (245.1 × 228.6 × 89.9 cm)



## ON BERLIN AND THE VOLKSEMPFÄNGERS

By Tom Preiss

Before the Kienholzes decided to move to West Berlin, they had already established their working relationship. The first piece they jointly created was *The Middle Islands No. 1*, 1972, and this was the last Kienholz work to come out of L.A. They also had begun the move to Idaho, and the extensive project of building a studio, family compound and surrounding cultural community. They had no intention to turn their back on city life forever, and West Berlin was a fortuitous choice for them.

The truncated city was politically and culturally on the move, hungry for new impulses. Visiting international artists were a welcome input and a boost to the former capital that lingered in cultural and economic isolation.

Change was in the air, though—West Germany, for the first time since the short-lived Weimar Republic of the roaring 1920s, had a government that was not run by the right-leaning Christian center coalition. Berlin's former mayor, Willy Brandt, during his tenure as Chancellor of the Republic, had opened the dialogue with the Eastern powers, and laid the diplomatic groundwork for a safer and more reliable future for the city. Travel to and from West Berlin became less restricted. One has to remember that to reach the city, one had to travel by road or air through East German territory, a Warsaw Pact Stalinist state. The Iron Curtain was becoming softer, and people became more optimistic about Berlin.

It is commonplace now to see a thriving art scene as a motor for urban renewal. However, West Berlin was the first example in Germany where this concept became public policy. The German Academic Exchange Service (*Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst*, or DAAD) invited

the Kienholzes to Berlin as part of this initiative in 1972, and the two responded in kind by becoming tireless boosters for the city, which they found hospitable, inspiring, and learned to love.

Berlin became their permanent second home. The Kienholzes planned to create *The Art Show* from a 1963 *Concept Tableau*, and they had brought material from L.A. with them. Nancy later explained that if they had not found the Berlin flea markets—which proved so rich with finds, and fascinating—they might have been able to finish the project within a year. (Instead, it took Ed and Nancy five years to complete *The Art Show*, 1963–1977, which now resides in the permanent collection of The Berlinische Galerie.)

Through the Berlin studio, the flea market finds also found their way into the works they made in Idaho. Rich Post remembered that the Kienholzes brought the leg of an elephant to Hope. They had him stretch it over the perfect piece of driftwood pulled from the Denton Slough of Idaho's Lake Pend Oreille, and now it is part of *The Fountain* from the White Easel series. There is no obvious relationship of this particular White Easel piece to Berlin, but the elephant leg is one of those cruel souvenirs of imperial colonialism for which the Germans had no more use.

Artists in post-war Germany have confronted the country's Nazi past in many ways. The history of contemporary German art shows a good solid record of not avoiding these issues, and the artists who have expressed that particular German struggle with the past are household names. Nothing, though, prepared the German art audience for the appearance of *The Volksempfänger*. The title is so specifically Nazi German and synonymous

with Nazi propaganda, and yet it is used with a touch of humor by forming an English plural of a German noun. With a heading like this, it is clear that here are foreigners—*Ausländer*—making a statement on a very German piece of history.

Let us not quote Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, this piece of literary garbage, but somewhere in there is a clear outline of the need for a propaganda effort that concentrates on the simplest of core messages, and repeats these until the dumbest of the masses accept them as the given truth.

Besides the general issues of anti-semitism, anti-communism and anti-internationalism, which they shared with other nationalist movements of the time, the Nazis had two central themes that permeated their ideas of art and culture:

- One was “The Cult of the Mother,” which preached the maintenance of the race as the ultimate fulfillment of womanhood.
- The other was “The Cult of the Warrior Hero,” the ideal German male willing to make any sacrifice to defend the homeland of the master race.

These themes are what makes Nazi “cultural” products so unmistakable, be it a film by the Universum Film AG, a sculpture by Arno Breker, or a design by Albert Speer.

### THE KITCHEN TABLE

Nancy gives a lighthearted description of how *The Kitchen Table* came about:

“Upon returning from the flea market, Ed put two *Kleinempfänger*s on an old kitchen table we had in the studio. I put this romantic photograph of a woman hugging a horse on the same table. Later that day, we turned the radios around so they were facing each other, and put the photo between them. Voila.”



Noah Kienholz and Ed Kienholz, Noack Foundry, Berlin, 1977

It is an enlightening description of how an idea is born. With the move of a few decisive parts, the entire composition of the work is set.

The actual physical completion of the work is equally instructive. The table was cut down until it only had the depth of a shelf, and the space below was enclosed with galvanized sheet metal. Formed by these, together with the floor plate covered in the same material, the whole now had considerably more mass. Both radios had their power cords draped over the side, and each plugged into outlets on the sides of the table. These period Bakelite plugs and fabric-covered wires do not function electrically; they are a compositional element that connects the two characters/radios to the same base, a visual parenthesis. The antennae spread from each radio up and out on the wall behind, and connect the work to the exhibition space and to our contemporary airwaves. The foot switch protrudes as an invitation to activate the audio, but is also a connection of the viewer's space to the space the work itself occupies.

This first *Volksempfänger* sets the major themes and elements that the series builds upon. The radios, standing in for the men, are stuck in a fruitless dialogue. Wired to the same source, they endlessly echo themselves. The woman is caught in between, and as a romantic fiction. The empty

steel skeleton of a chair underlines the hopelessness and hostility of such a kitchen table conversation.

*The Kitchen Table* is also shown here in a bronze version, a first in the Kienholz oeuvre. While Berlin has quite a bit of classic modern and contemporary architecture, it is in large part dominated by Neo-Classicism. The Noack Foundry, family-owned through the fourth generation, produced bronze sculpture since the Kaiser's days, and has restored 18th century works by Andreas Schlüter and cast monumental works by Henry Moore. Now the Noacks were asked to translate *The Kitchen Table* into this most traditional medium. It is to their credit that they enthusiastically accepted the challenge, their meticulous casting and finishing technique created a stunning effect when the two versions are seen side by side. On its own, the translation of the assemblage into a cast bronze questioned the margins that we set for our concept of art. Is a radio cast in bronze still a found object? *The Kitchen Table (bronze version)* reaches out and claims an age-old tradition as a source and continuum for contemporary art.



Studio at Meinekestrasse 6, Berlin, 1976

## DER OFENSCHIRM / THE FIRE SCREEN

This assemblage puts the VE301 radio in his natural environment; it is a vignette of a German living room from the period. The radio has the place of honor on its own—a rather heavily built end table.

There is no sign of French elegance in this piece of furniture; the taste of the times was rather retro, anti-modern, projecting weight and traditional solidity.

The fire screen that lends the work its name is also an example of this sense of “Blood and Earth” (*Blut und Boden*) style. It is a cheaply stamped sheet metal product, but it imitates the hand-hammered surface of German arts and craft metalwork. Anything hand-forged from iron was considered very Germanic. For the mass market, an imitation had to be good enough. These products were tinny and cheap, a bit of fakery and stagecraft, but they made the Nazi aesthetic affordable for any German home.

*The Fire Screen* was always installed with an especially rusty, skimpy looking antenna, perhaps to underline the flimsiness of these attempts at grandiosity.

## NOTUNG

In the setting of a gallery opening, *Notung*, as it spreads out on the floor, gathers a crowd around it. The installation evokes a meeting place, with the mythical sword ceremoniously placed at the center of the gathering.

In the Wagnerian version of the Norse saga, this is Siegfried's sword, forged from his father's broken weapon. It has awesome, magical powers. In Nazi terminology, it is a *Wunderwaffe*, a miracle weapon, very much like the technological miracles that were supposed to win the war for them, but never materialized. They, too, were an invention of propaganda.

The Kienholzes' rendering of this fabled weapon also reveals itself as an invention.



Ed in Berlin studio with Washboard

The hilt and crossguard are made up from a double-handled sausage chopper. The menacing blade is the nose or rostrum of a sawfish, a rather peaceful (now endangered) species that still hunts small fish in the Florida Keys.

### BRÜNNHILDE

*Brünnhilde* is a central character in Wagner's *Ring*.

As the story goes, she was condemned by her father, the god Wotan, to eternal sleep, unless a man stripped her of her armor and possessed her. It does not end well for her, or the gods. She immolates herself on her beloved Siegfried's funeral pyre, causing the end of *Vallhalla* and the deaths of the gods inhabiting it.

The Kienholzes rendered this character with stark irony. *Brünnhilde* is doubly encaged, a set of two washboards forms her breast- and backplates, and she sits in an iron crate. Her fate and her role are a prison.

Her footswitch starts the audio and activates a small spotlight within her cage, lighting up her Mother's Cross.

*Brünnhilde* was a prototype for the Nazis' ideal woman who would rather die a fiery death than betray her hero lover. She may have served as a role model for Frau Goebbels, who poisoned herself and her six young children, so they wouldn't grow up without the Führer.

The socket or pedestal that serves as a base for the work is used as the Kienholzes found it, with its institutional grey-green coat of paint. It is easy to imagine that it once held the bust of Frederick the Great or some other patriotic hero, in an institution of higher learning.

### DIE NORNEN / THE NORNS

*The Norns* are figures of Norse and North German mythology. They are the daughters of Erda, the Mother Earth, and their job is to weave the strands of fate that control the lives of all mortals and their gods, if a mistake happens. These three characters are represented by the washboards in crates. That they hold a dangerous potential is made clear by the yellow high tension wire that powers the neon tube running through them. The radio in the foreground, the lamp— it all connects to the high voltage transformer in the rear right corner. The strands of fate transport dangerous energy that runs through the whole.

The objects that the Kienholzes used in *The Volksempfänger* were the tools of a grand deception of the German people. The Mother Crosses honored the German mother, only to feed their children into the meat grinder. The radios brought hateful speeches into every living room. The Germanic furniture was supposed to speak of solidity and quality to last a thousand years. Even their mythology, stolen from the Norse, was fake Wagnerian stagecraft and flimflam.

In a greatly inventive forensic effort, the Kienholzes gathered all into these works, and made them intelligible in a quiet way. They did not resort to exploiting the horror of it all, rather they inserted some humor, but did not create caricature. They allowed us to face this evidence of German history with dignity, and without any chance at nostalgia.

*The Volksempfänger* were first shown in the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin. This landmark museum is dedicated to modern and contemporary art. It is run and owned by the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation. There could not have been a more fitting venue.

*Tom Preiss and his wife Karin Herman-Preiss worked with the Kienholzes as studio assistants in Berlin (since 1982), Idaho (since 1985) and Houston (since 1990) through 1997.*



Studio in Hope, Idaho, 1975

## ON HOPE AND THE WHITE EASEL SERIES

By Rich Post

The White Easel series was my first introduction to “modern art.”

They are both a response to a space and a nod to the more formal still lifes of another era. Rather than a bowl of fruit or a vase of flowers that an artist may paint on a canvas, these were three-dimensional and quite a bit heavier. We all have the bad backs to prove it.

When the initial part of the new studio in Idaho was complete, it was a formidable space to be dealt with, and it was not the only thing going on in this world. Construction continued all around, and yet Ed and Nancy’s need and desire to make art never stopped.

The Hope area had a lot of material for free and for the taking. Small pieces all told or some part of the whole would be brought to the studio to be studied or stored.

Ed would have these bits stacked against the new wall of the studio. He would spend a lot of time looking at and moving things about. When you came into the studio, you might be asked to hold something a little more to the left or right, up or down, and make a mark. A lot of bits got arranged into specific compositions.

These pieces came together, but the overriding visual component was the wall. There was no denying its presence. Finally, the wall itself became an element in many of the works. The 4 by 4 inch timbers, the cinder block wall, and the lights were rigged to give the points that Ed desired.

The replica background wall and easel were built to convey the studio space that had to be confronted.

*Rich Post worked with the Kienholzes as a studio assistant in Idaho from 1977–1993. Following Ed Kienholz’s death, he assisted Nancy Reddin Kienholz until 2009.*





## A FEW NOTES ON THE WHITE EASEL SERIES

By Nancy Reddin Kienholz

The driftwood used in the White Easel series came from the drift yard at the Denton Slough, on Lake Pend Oreille in Hope, near the mouth of the Clark Fork river.

### THE FOUNTAIN

The elephant leg came from a Berlin flea market. We shipped it to Idaho, and soaked it in water. When Rich was stretching it over the driftwood stump, the smell was pervasive. The dogs would growl when they passed it.

### WHITE EASEL WITH FACE

The wax face came from Dennis Hopper. Dennis had found, and subsequently sold to Ed, a whole prop trunk (approximately 40 × 36 × 18 inches large) full of World War II wax faces and torsos. These were used to teach soldiers the effects of syphilis, and to illustrate its horrible symptoms. One of these heads was also used inside the resin head of the black man in *Five Car Stud*.

### WHITE EASEL WITH MACHINE PISTOL

The gun was found at an Idaho flea market. It is a mockup of a machine gun made from the slide of one gun, a barrel from another, and some made-up wooden frame. We could never figure out why anyone would make such a gun.

## WORKS

**THE KITCHEN TABLE (TRANSITIONAL VERSION), 1975–77**

mixed media and bronze

41 ½ × 67 × 21 ¼ in. (105.4 × 170.2 × 54 cm)

**THE KITCHEN TABLE (BRONZE VERSION), 1975–1977**

mixed media and bronze

41 ½ × 67 × 21 ¾ in. (105.4 × 170.2 × 55.2 cm)

**DER OFENSCHIRM / THE FIRE SCREEN, 1975**

mixed media assemblage

61 ¼ × 39 ½ × 17 ¾ in. (155.6 × 100.3 × 45.1 cm)

**DER ZEMENTKASTEN / THE CEMENT BOX, 1976**

mixed media assemblage

70 ½ × 29 ⅝ × 18 in. (179.1 × 75.2 × 45.7 cm)

**NOTUNG, 1976**

mixed media assemblage

73 ⅝ × 70 ¾ × 75 ½ in. (187 × 180 × 192 cm)

**BRÜNNHILDE, 1976**

mixed media assemblage

61 ½ × 41 ¾ × 18 in. (156 × 106 × 46 cm)

**DIE NORNEN / THE NORNS, 1976**

mixed media assemblage

61 ½ × 115 ¾ × 61 ½ in. (156.2 × 294 × 156.2 cm)

*The Volksempfänger* series was first shown at the Nationalgalerie, Berlin, West Germany in 1977, and traveled to Galerie Maeght Zürich, Switzerland; Bavarian National Gallery, Munich, West Germany; and Galleria d'Arte il Gabbince, Rome, Italy. Subsequently, select works from the series have been shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; and Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, Germany.

**THE FOUNTAIN, 1977**

mixed media assemblage

96 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 65 × 22 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (245.7 × 165.1 × 57.2 cm)

**WHITE EASEL WITH FACE, 1977**

mixed media assemblage

110 × 84 × 25 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (279.4 × 213.4 × 64.8 cm)

**WHITE EASEL WITH WOODEN HAND, 1978**

mixed media assemblage

105 × 182 × 28 in. (266.7 × 462.3 × 71.1 cm)

**WHITE EASEL WITH MACHINE PISTOL, 1979**

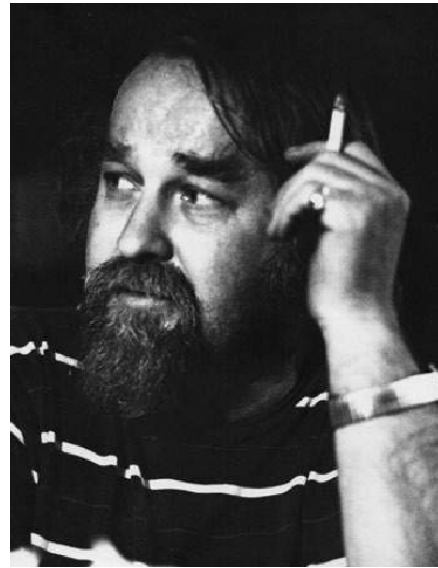
mixed media assemblage

96 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> × 90 × 35 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (245.1 × 228.6 × 89.9 cm)

Select works from the White Easel series have been exhibited at the Museum of Art, Washington State University, Pullman, WA; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA; Cheney Cowles Memorial Museum and Touchstone Center for the Visual Arts, Spokane, WA; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Armand Hammer Museum of Art, University of California, Los Angeles, CA; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; and Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, Germany.



## BIOGRAPHY



Nancy and Ed, Berlin, 1973

Edward Kienholz (1927–1994) and Nancy Reddin Kienholz (b. 1943) began their artistic partnership in 1972. Over the course of their marriage and collaborative working relationship, the couple became widely recognized for their assemblage works and large-scale tableaux that distinguished them among the most important artists of the post-war era. They have been the subject of numerous exhibitions worldwide, including a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York in 1996, that traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA later that year, and Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, Germany in 1997. A decade later, BALTIC, The Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, England organized a comprehensive survey of the artists' work in 2005, which went on to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia in 2006. In 2009, the Kienholzes' seminal tableau

*The Hoerengracht* (1983–1988) was exhibited at the National Gallery, London, England and The Amsterdam Historical Museum, Netherlands in 2011. Also in 2011, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art endeavored to exhibit the rarely seen *Five Car Stud*, created by Ed Kienholz in 1969–1972. *Five Car Stud* traveled to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebeak, Denmark in 2012, and now resides in the permanent collection of the Fondazione Prada, Milan, Italy. Major works by Ed and Nancy were featured in *Kienholz: The Sign of the Times* at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany in 2011, and traveled to the Museum Tinguely, Frankfurt, Germany in 2012. In 2014, works by Kienholz will be included in the 5th Yokohama Triennial, and the 10th Gwangju Biennale in Korea will present *The Ozymandias Parade* (1985).

## NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Front cover: detail of *Der Ofenschirm/The Fire Screen*, 1975

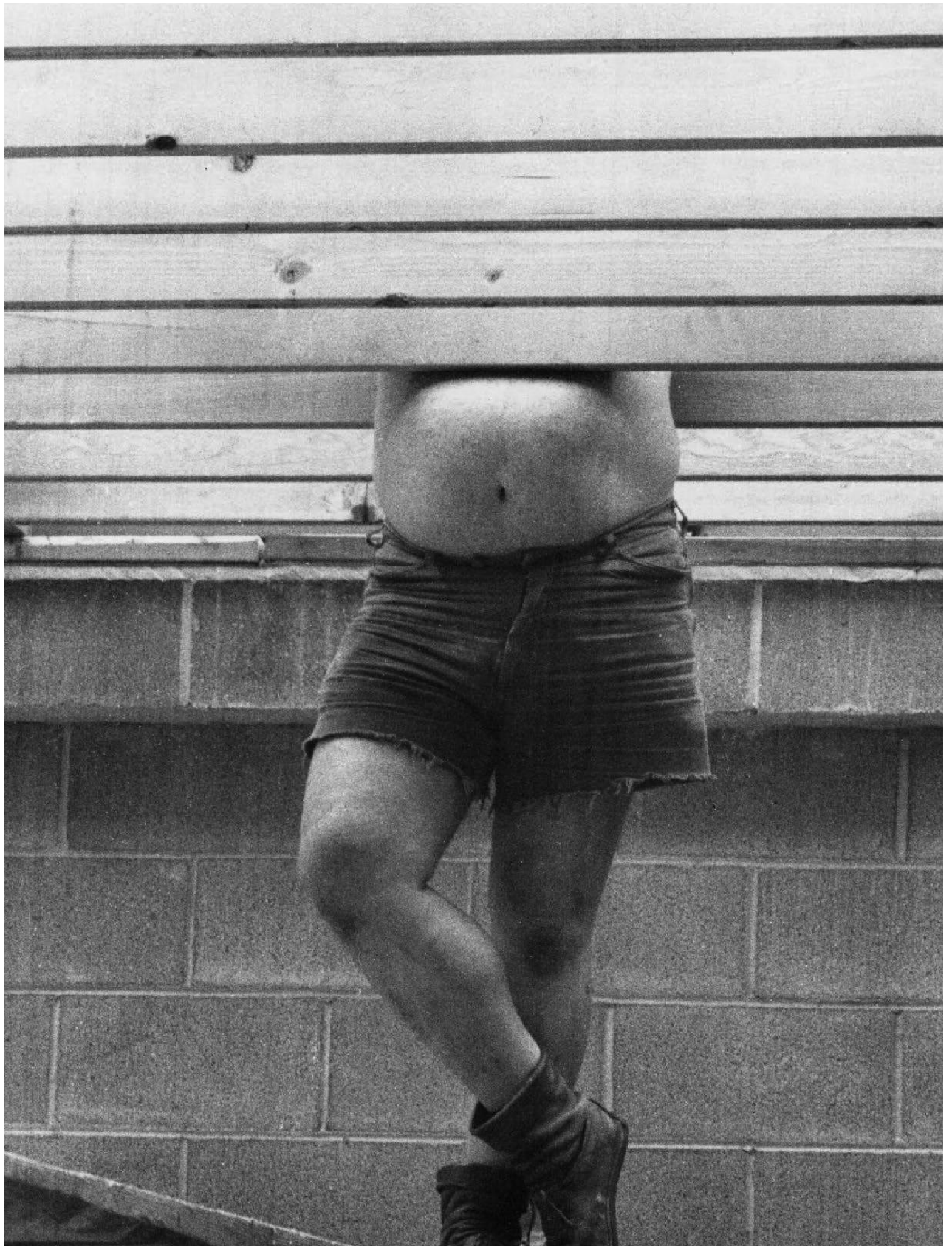
Back cover: detail of *White Easel with Face*, 1977

Inside front and back covers: Ed and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, unfinished studio, Hope, Idaho, 1975

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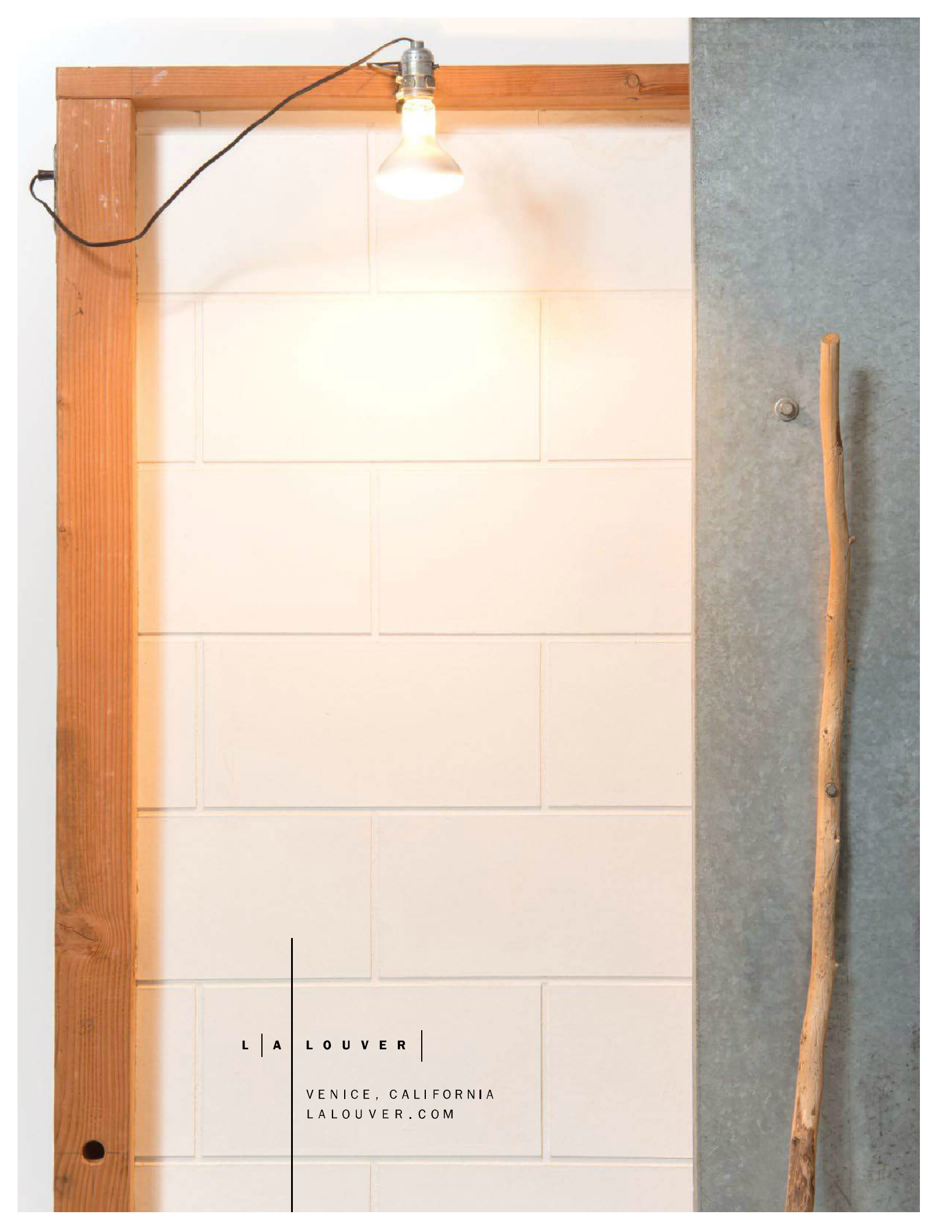
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