

SOME WORKS, 1967-1980

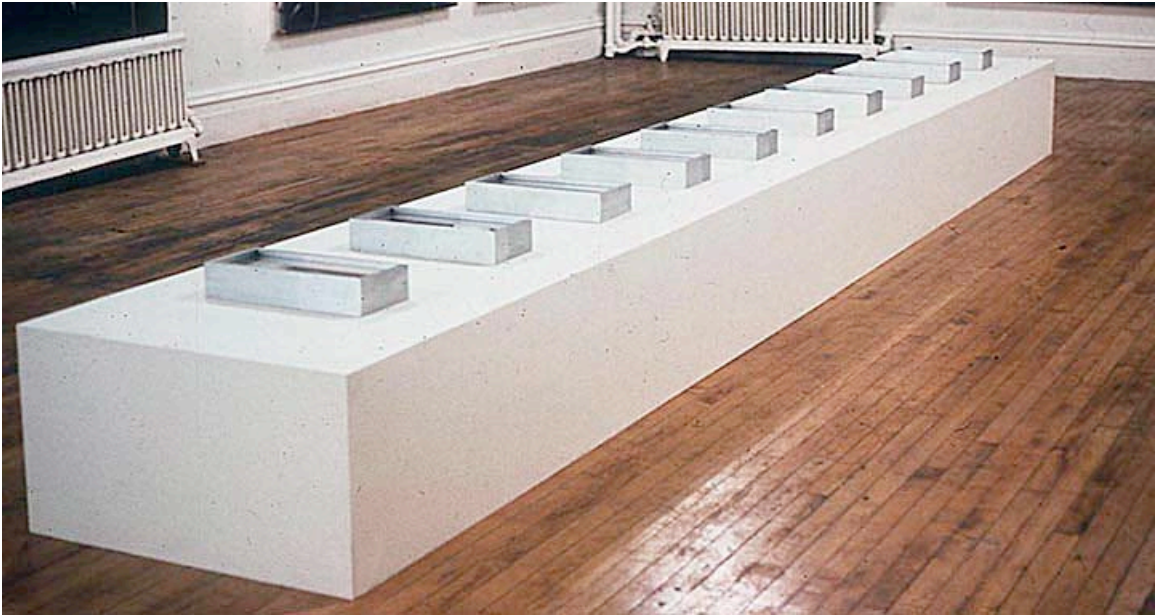
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I am writing to explicate a group of works conceived primarily between 1967 and 1980. This analysis becomes all the more necessary if the work is known only from photographs.

These pieces have broken new ground by revealing certain perceptual structures of our experience not previously made evident in any other art practice. Since these works function on an extremely physical level, before trying to draw any overall conclusions, I think it would be helpful to clarify the relationships that develop between the works and the viewer (or, more accurately, the participant) in a few key pieces. This selection reveals a commonality as well as a progression of thought.

Lewis Stein, untitled, 1967-74, series of 10, each 3"x 7 1/2"x15 1/2". (7.8x19x39.3 cm), hammer, aluminum box, masonite and acrylic





series of 10 on display

1) Hammers

In these works I have taken a common object, painted it in two attractive colors, put it against an equally attractive painted background, and placed it in a box with a Plexiglas cover. The object is not just any object, but an object with a special relationship to the human body – specifically, the hand. It is what Heidegger called a “ready-to hand” object. Under normal circumstances, hammers are perceived in terms of their intended use. They infer the implication of assertive or even possibly violent action. One is inclined to take the hammer in hand to test its worthiness or to prepare an action. Then, in using the hammer, one loses awareness of it – when hammering, the hammer in a sense no longer exists.

In this piece, however, all normal relationships to the hammer are thwarted. It becomes beautiful but inaccessible undermining and mocking its use. Consequently, tension develops between what the viewer knows in his/her body about the nature of the object and what is revealed as something other.

Lewis Stein, untitled, 1968-71, 22"x16"x30" (60x41x76), kraft paper shopping bags and solid plaster

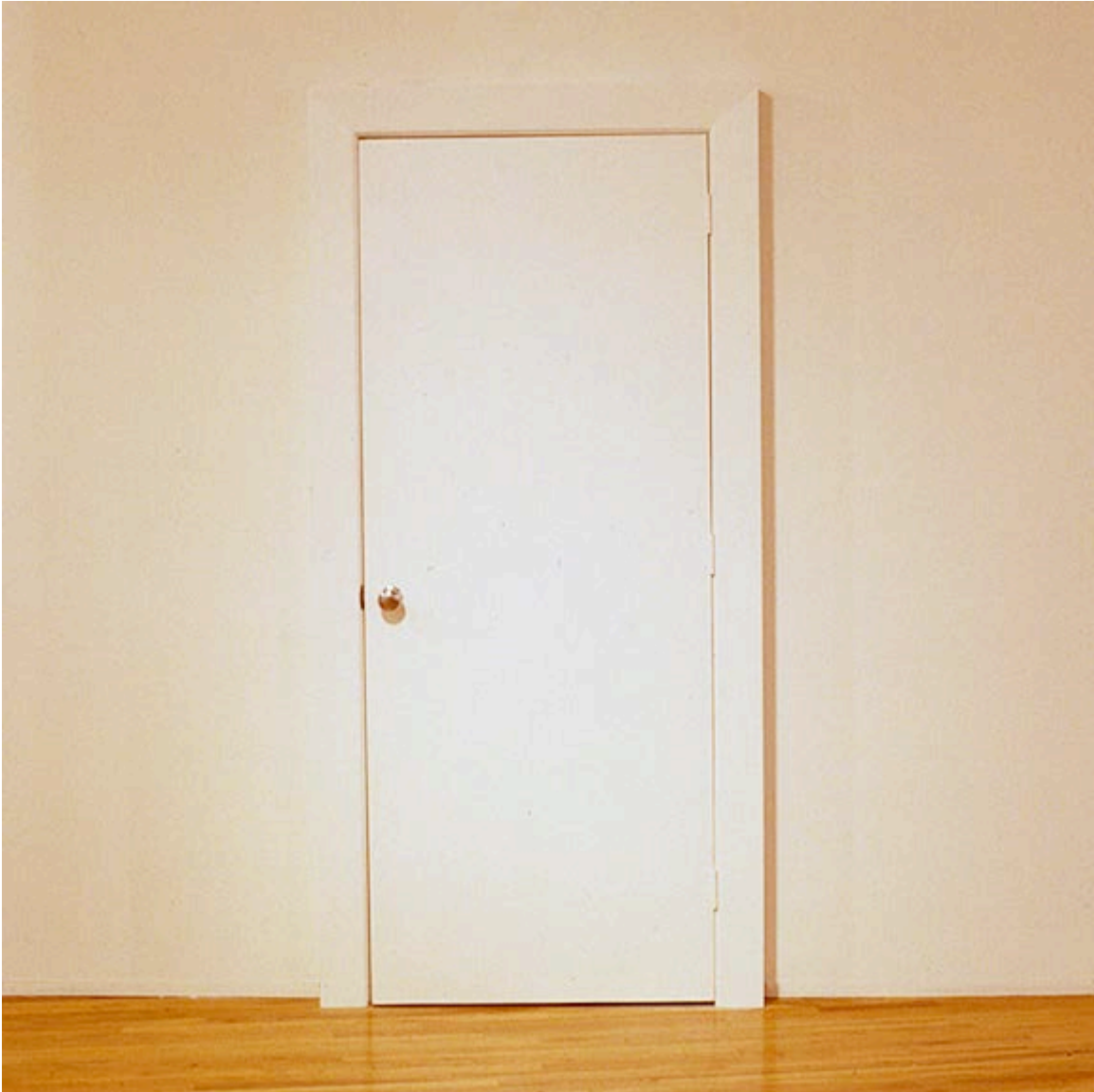


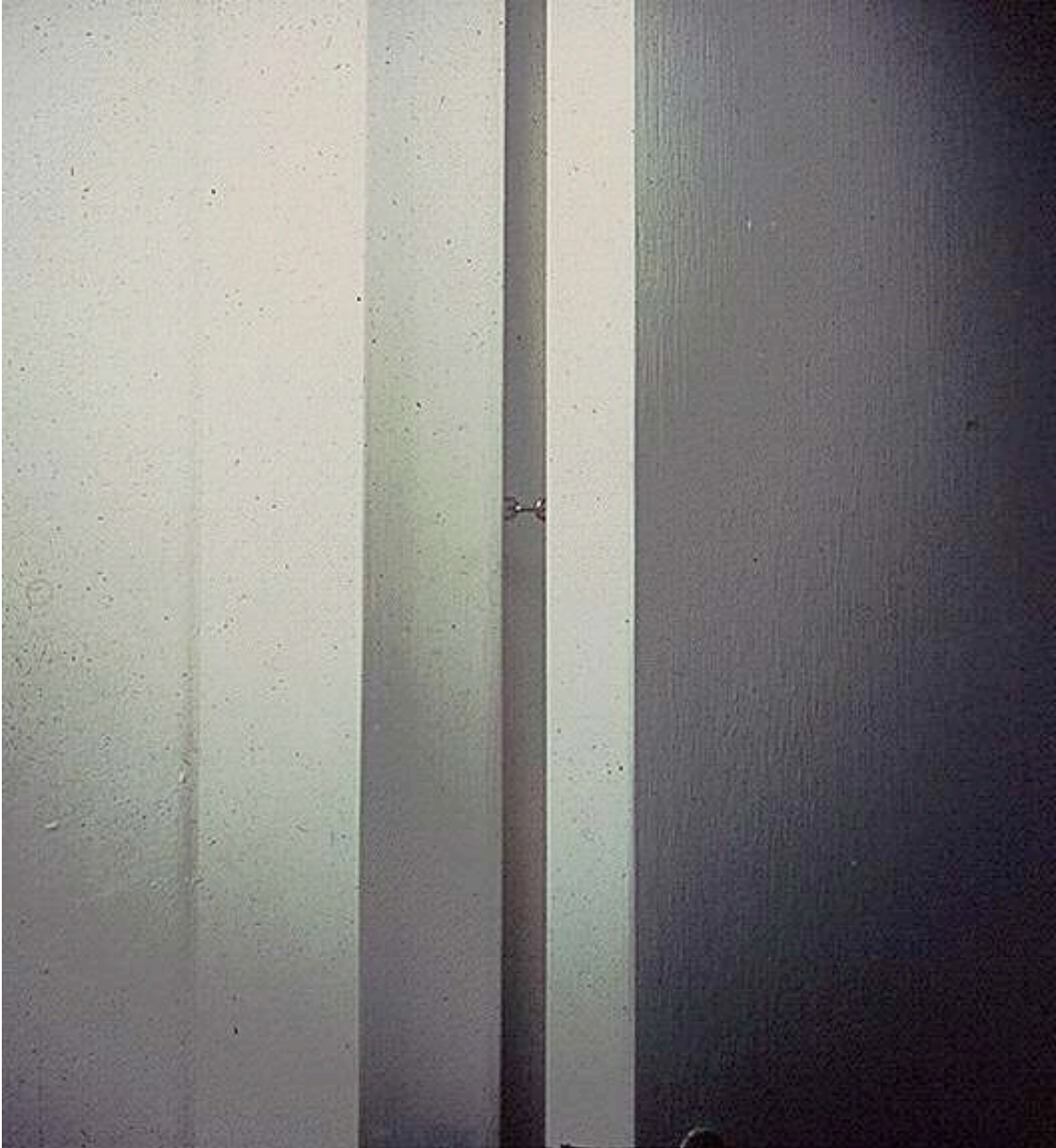


2) Paper shopping bags

This piece consists of two ordinary paper shopping bags that are three-fourths full of solidified plaster and placed sixteen inches apart. The handles on the bags as well as the spacing between them suggest the possibility of stepping between the bags and lifting them. At the same time, they are presented in a context where there is a felt prohibition to carry out this action, because it is clear that the bags are quite heavy – if lifted, it is understood that the piece would probably be destroyed. Tension develops between this felt possibility and the clear prohibition.

Lewis Stein, untitled, 1968-72, 85"x41"x3 1/2" (216x104x9 cm), solid core wood door, chrome door hardware, enamel and wood





detail

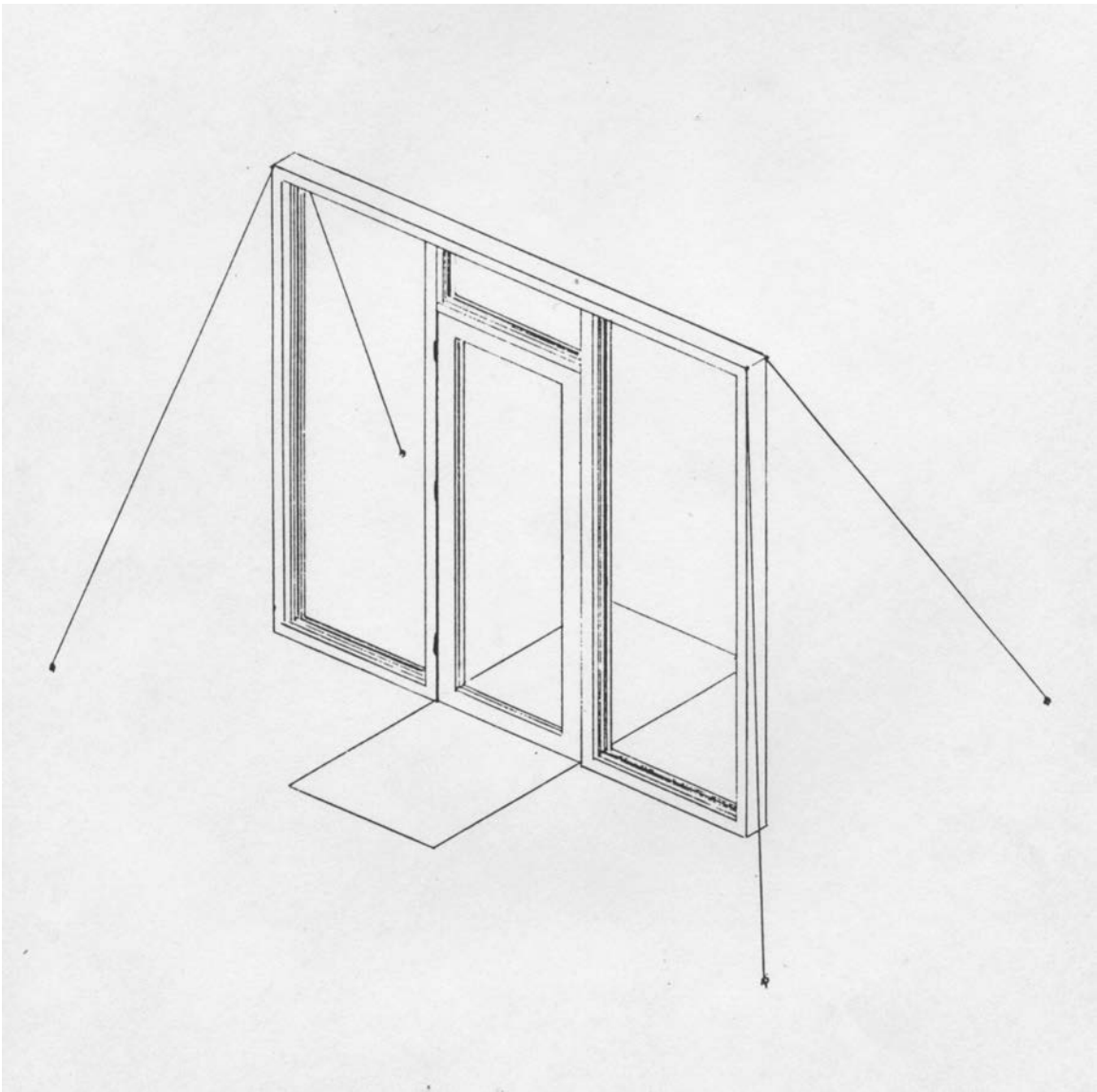
3) Chained door

This piece consists of a solid core door in a door jamb secured to a wall. A regular door chain is secured between the door and the jamb from the inside. Under optimal circumstances, ten or more identical doors would be placed at regular intervals in an exhibition space. It is understood that the doors probably do not lead anywhere, yet we perceive in terms of possibility. When seeing the doors, the viewer feels just two options: he can try one of the doors, or he can resist their call. In either case, the doors have made their mark; once engaged, the body's action is determined in relation to the doors.

If the viewer opens one of the doors, he is startled (even if he knows beforehand that a chain from the inside closes them) by the sudden jolt caused by the restraint of the chain. A door that leads nowhere, that can be opened, but only a few inches – very frustrating. But then, what of all the other doors – are they all the same? Tremendous bodily tension develops; now, as at the beginning, the viewer has the choice of trying all the doors or holding himself back and trying to ignore the impulse. The interrogation of the doors – there is no way out.

Lewis Stein, untitled, 1969 - , This piece consists of an automatically opening aluminum and glass door in a jamb with surrounding panels and wire supports as indicated.

If someone steps on the mat on the appropriate side, the door will open automatically



Lewis Stein, untitled, 1971, 27"x19"x19" (67x48x48 cm), garbage can





detail showing inside

Lewis Stein, untitled, 1974, 16"x13"x172" (40.6x33x437 cm), stainless steel step-on cans with white plastic inserts

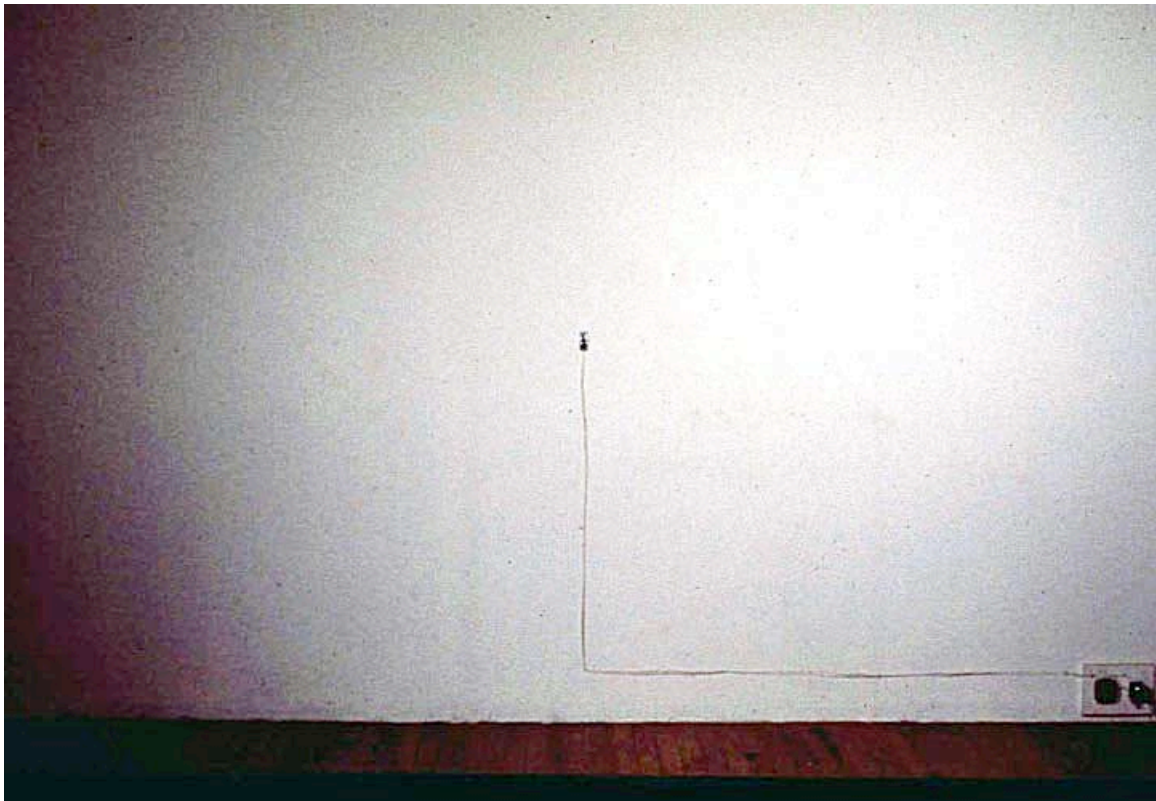
Variations – cans in copper, chrome plated steel and white enameled steel – all with white plastic inserts

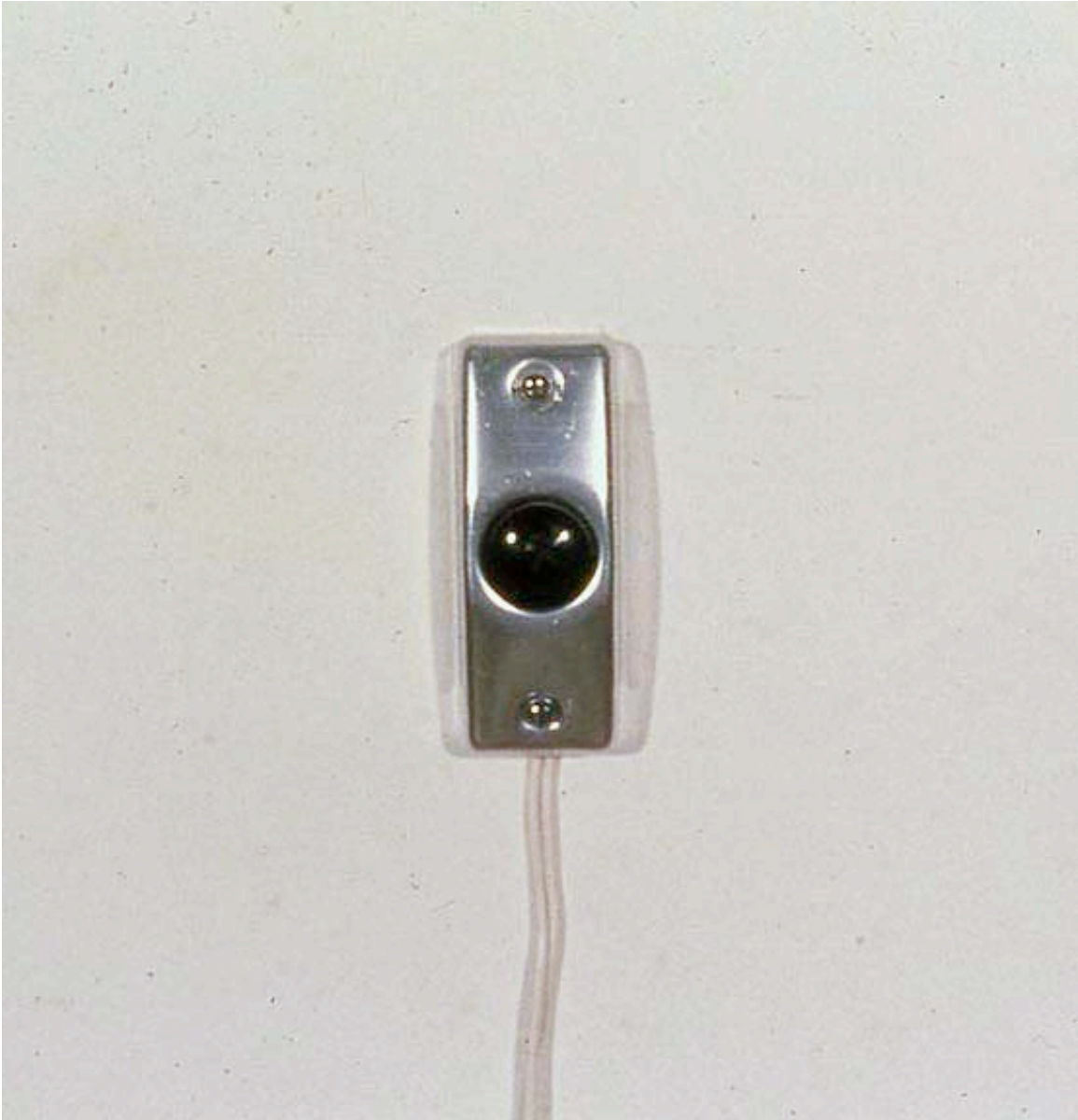




Lewis Stein, untitled, 1976, 47"x72x3" (119x82x716 cm), push button, bell cord, buzzer, transformer

If push button is pushed a buzzer buzzes





detail showing push button

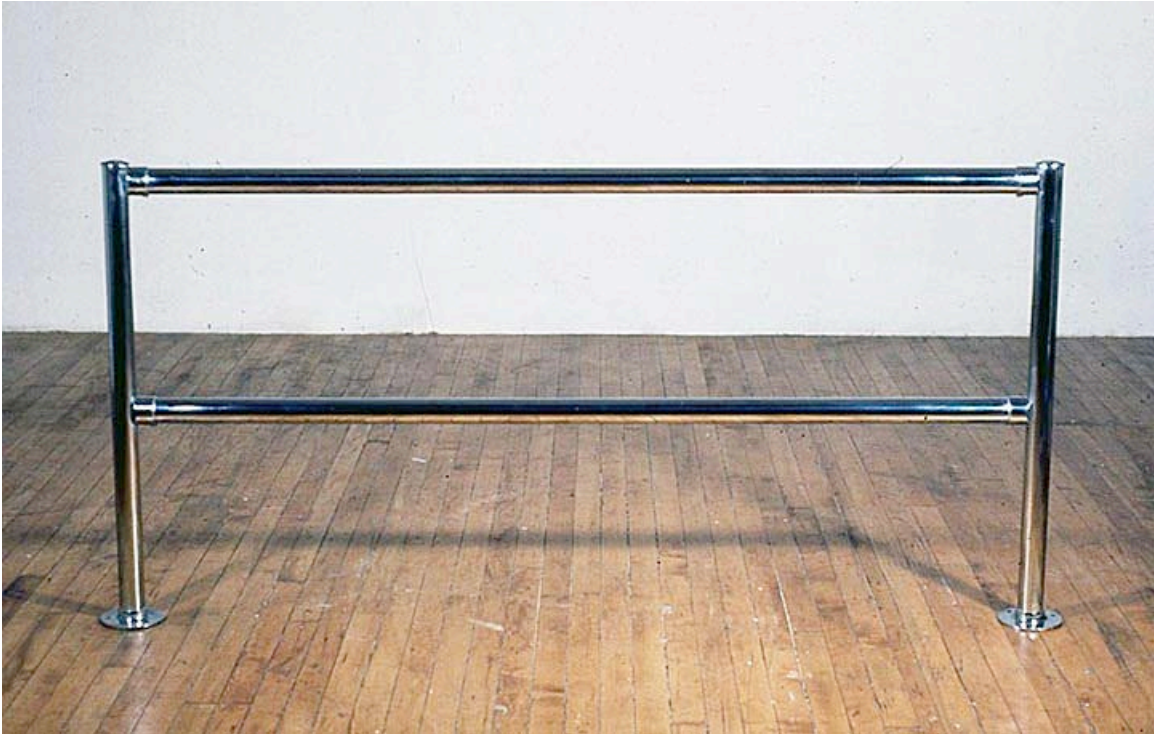
- 4) Automatic door
- 5) Garbage can
- 6) Step-on cans
- 7) Buzzer

These piece all function in a similar way. As in the chained-door piece, when confronted with any of these works, the viewer feels and know (in his body) that he has but two choices: to execute the action that the object beckons him to do, or to refuse to participate; either way, the viewer has thoroughly understood the work. Once engaged in this dilemma, there is literally no way out.

In contrast to the chained-door piece, however, if the viewer chooses to manipulate these objects, nothing different from his average expectations happens: when he steps on the pad, the automatic door opens and he can walk through; when he opens the lid of the garbage can he perceives the can as empty and is left holding the lid; similarly, when he steps on the pedals of the step-on cans, the lids open and he successively discovers that nothing is inside; when the push-button is pressed, a buzzer sounds.

No entertainment or diversion is provided; there is the sense of having completed an action that leads nowhere and accomplishes nothing. The object gives back nothing, for the subject of the piece is the viewer, not the object.

Lewis Stein, untitled, 1973, 36"x72"x5" (91x183x13 cm), chrome plated rail



8) Rail

This work consists of a freestanding rail placed in a space. It is understood that its sole function is to block one's path. In an art context, it serves the same function, but its placement is completely gratuitous. The viewer is faced with a null situation. The piece is like a mirror in which the viewer sees nothing other than his reflection as he moves in relation to the work.

Lewis Stein, untitled, 1979, 120"x2" (305x5 cm), white acrylic paint

This piece does not specifically relate to its surroundings – it can be installed in any suitable space on any suitable surface



9) Painted line

This piece consists of a white line 10' long and 2" wide painted on the floor. The line is intended as non-referential.

The piece functions very much like the rail and several other object works. The line, however, is not an object, but a sign. Its very presence creates a field in which the viewer's movement and focus are determined in relation to it. Yet again, the situation is left unresolved.

Lewis Stein, untitled, 1979-80, 38"x98"x16" (96.5x250x40.6 cm), 250 watt high pressure sodium lamp and bulb, 6' steel extension arm



10) Street lamp

This piece functions more aggressively than earlier works and creates a much more clearly defined situation. Here the viewer, once involved, has no options – he is quite literally radiated with the light. The piece makes clear the active, controlling quality of light and of public illumination.

What these works have in common and how they are different from previous works:

“Use your head, can’t you, use your head, you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!”
from Endgame by Samuel Beckett

All these works deal with the body’s relationship to a cultural object (or sign, as in the case of #9). These objects are neither neutral nor aesthetic objects, but objects with a particular function or use. Some exist in a more-or-less domestic context (the hammers, shopping bags, garbage can and step-on cans); others in a more general social context (the automatic door, rail and street lamp). In all cases, I have removed the objects from their cultural-use role and placed them in an art or intentional context. The objects no longer exert an impersonal control, but rather a directed control; they all put the viewer into a predicament with no readily apparent resolution – not an intellectual predicament, but one felt clearly and strongly in the body.

This highly self-reflective situation creates the ground for the viewer to develop a heightened awareness of some of the filaments of just how caught in the world we are. Thus, in a very real sense, the viewer is the subject of all these works. If the work is successful, it creates such a cul-de-sac experience that it forces consciousness of a way to relate to this situation. This is through a complete, conscious acknowledgment and acceptance of our inextricable involvement in the world in which we function. These works thus reveal the veracity of the truism “We are least aware of what is closest to us,” and propose a remedy.