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## Dancing on Ruins: the allegorical architecture of IOOA

Henry Urbach

The installations of Interim Office of Architecture work with pieces of modernity run amok. IOOA, as the name suggests, situates its projects at the interim—at once acknowledging the accumulated detritus of history and, at the same time, the possibility of repair. Whether addressing ecologies of waste, the omnipresence of electronic surveillance, fussy codes of hygiene or the limits of Enlightenment reason, IOOA persistently investigates architecture's complicity and asks: what now?

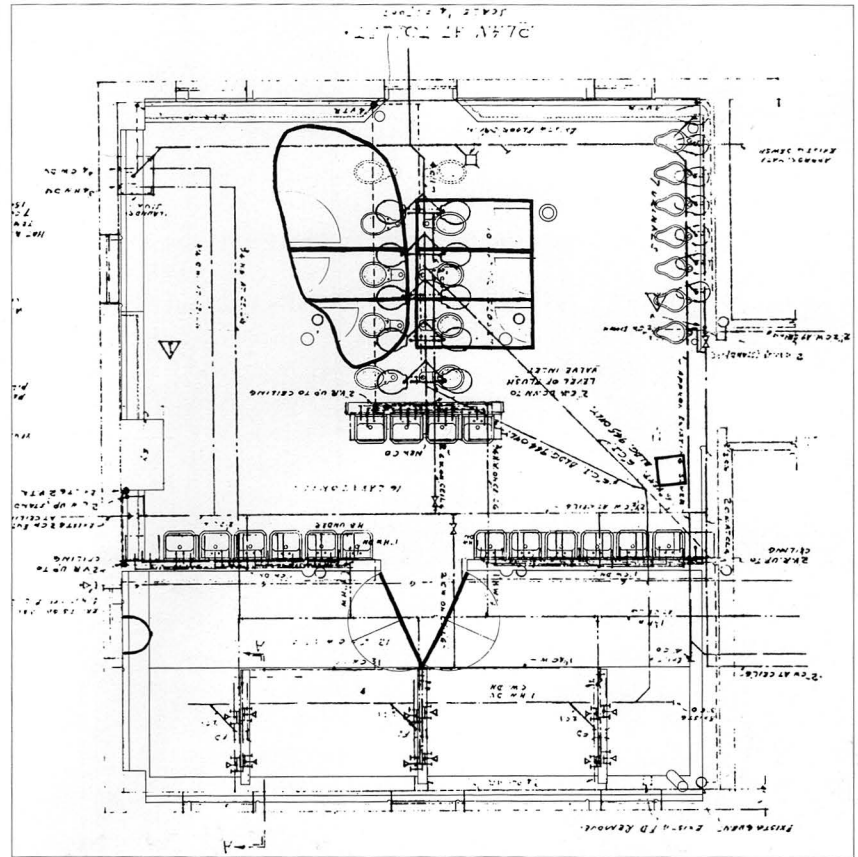
IOOA's three installations to date—"The Latrine Project," "Subjective Archives," and "Prima Facie"—constitute fragments of a hypostasized world. In these places, conditions typically masked are laid bare, and questions normally suppressed are posed. The projects consistently reject spurious harmony to demonstrate, instead, instabilities of architectural meaning. Though formally reduced, these are charged, edged spaces.

"The Latrine Project" reconfigures an erstwhile single-sex military latrine to form a coed public lavatory for an arts center. In the original latrine, installed in the 1940s, a group of toilets sat in the middle of the room with no dividing partitions: soldiers evidently had nothing to hide. Without moving the fixtures, IOOA introduced "privacy" assemblages—curved and rectilinear constructions of 1/4 inch steel plate. Though they at first appear to provide

personal security, the stalls' cold, creaking doors and unusually short partitions end up exacerbating anxieties of adjacency. In this latrine, IOOA at once demonstrates and subverts the capacity of architectural boundaries to delimit private territory in social space.

Like some of IOOA's residential interiors, this installation examines conventions of common decency. Not only are men's and women's facilities joined (a mute line of unenclosed urinals challenging cohabitation and testifying to the room's past), but mechanisms usually hidden are exposed and expressed as well. When a toilet is flushed, its flexible, braided steel tube (actually, an aircraft fuel line) wiggles under high pressure while the overamplified noise resounds through the room. Departing from military and civilian codes of bathroom design alike, this one positions itself in-between—to acknowledge the peculiarities of both and ironize their authority.

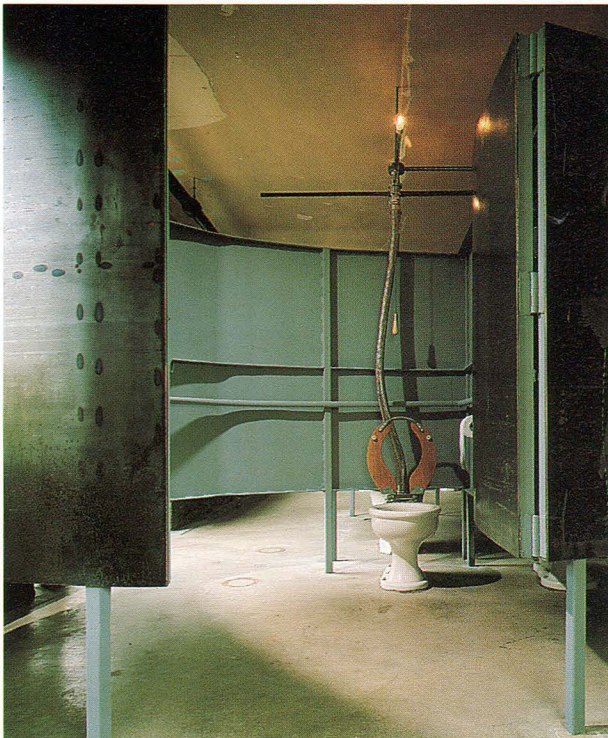
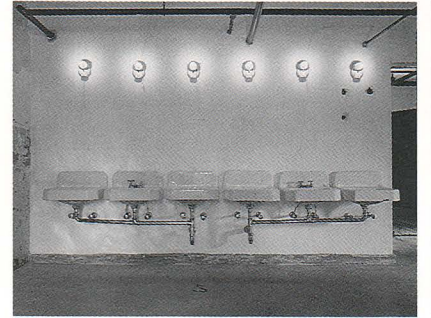
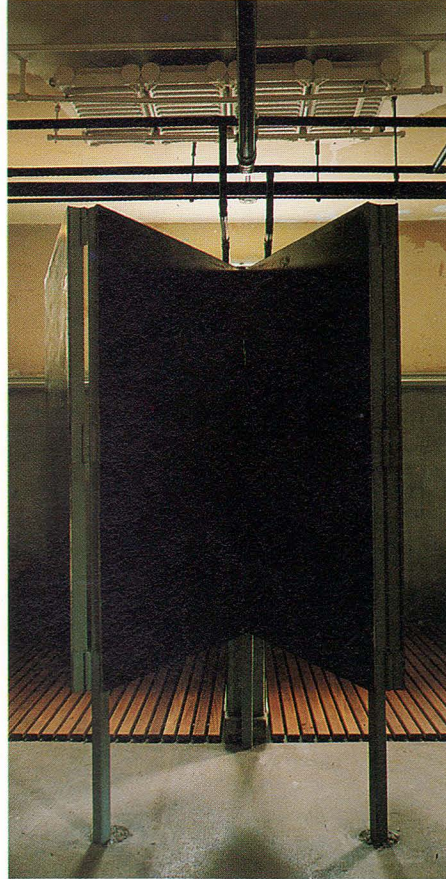
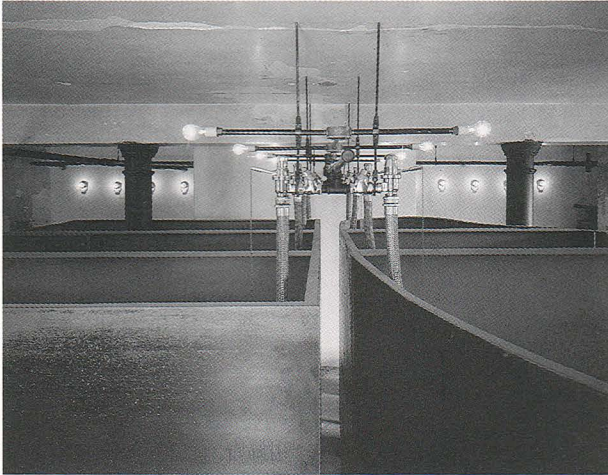
While "The Latrine Project" remains permanently on view and in use, IOOA's other installations have enjoyed shorter lives. They could be considered site-specific sculptural installations were it not that they never lose track of their architectural origins and consequences. By thematizing interrelationships of spatial definition, material, technique, program and use, they pinpoint moments where principles of architectural space-making fail. The



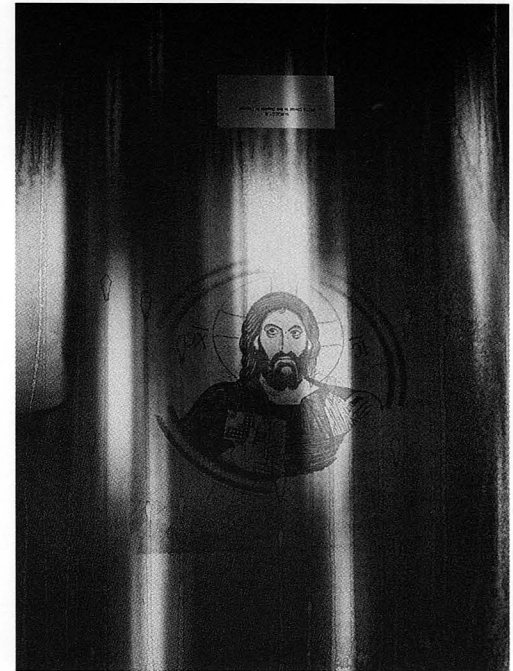
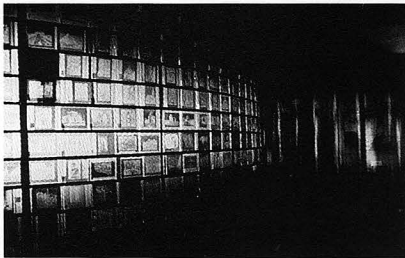
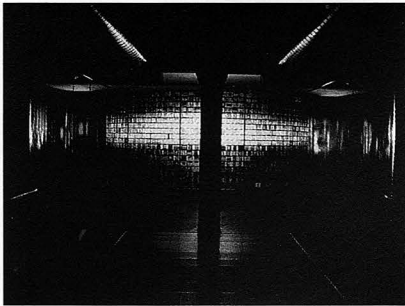
difference between inside and outside, the status of the center, the suppression of aural to visual experience, the regulatory role of the facade: these are some of the precepts IOOA thwarts.

"Subjective Archives: Panopticon of Utility and Obsolescence" (on view in 1990 at SF Camerawork and in 1991 at the California Museum of Photography) adapts the Panopticon to tran-

scribe images of architectural history. Working with an obsolete teaching archive (abandoned by UC Berkeley), IOOA set several thousand photographic glass negatives within a cylindrical metal armature, placed a 4,000 watt light source with pan position lens at the center, and aimed. What followed was a slow, uncertain printing of cyanotype images on emulsified gallery walls.



Photography: Paul Warchol



As images of architectural history coalesce and their negatives crack under the lamp's intense heat, "Subjective Archives" registers the elusiveness of historical artifacts. In the end, nothing remains: even the cyanotypes, which take days to print, begin to fade immediately and continuously until they vanish. Moreover, the obsolescence of the glass slides and the outmoded cyanotype technique (once the common origin of blueprint and photographic printing) emphasize the historicity of forms of historical representation.

IOOA twists the principles of panopticism, whereby centrifugal space aligns power with vision. In "Subjective Archives," the periphery, rather than the center, is privileged. Viewers circumambulate the wall of images, their gaze assisted by the backlighting. The viewers' presence produces multiple effects: caught in an interim position, between negative and print, they interfere with the production of images; at the same time, their footsteps set the tenuous structure into harmonic oscillation, causing the glass to chatter.

Another, more advanced form of panopticism appears—and again comes undone—in IOOA's third installation, "Prima Facie," where two interrelated systems of electronic surveillance are misused. Recording the presence and speed of vehicles on the facing street, a space the gallery usually excludes, mechanisms translate data into a series of interior spatial effects. Relations of inside and outside, of upper-level gallery and public street below, are continually confounded as IOOA forces the architectural facade to abandon its pretense to neutrality.

The interior comprises two complementary halves. Closest to the windows, one part (itself split) organizes optical sensations into two tele-visual corridors. Here, as a pair of window-mirror assemblies blink to admit light, passing cars trigger flashing images of sky and sidewalk. The panelized partition, activated by a traffic gun mounted on the building exterior, rumbles at a rate proportionate to the speed and number of passing cars. Standing apart from this spectacle of surveillance, the other half of the in-

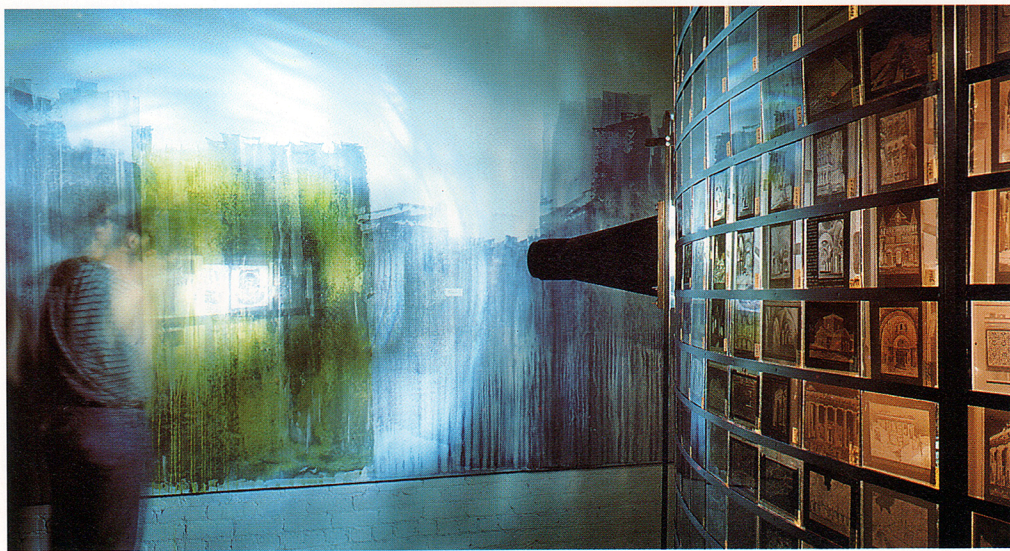
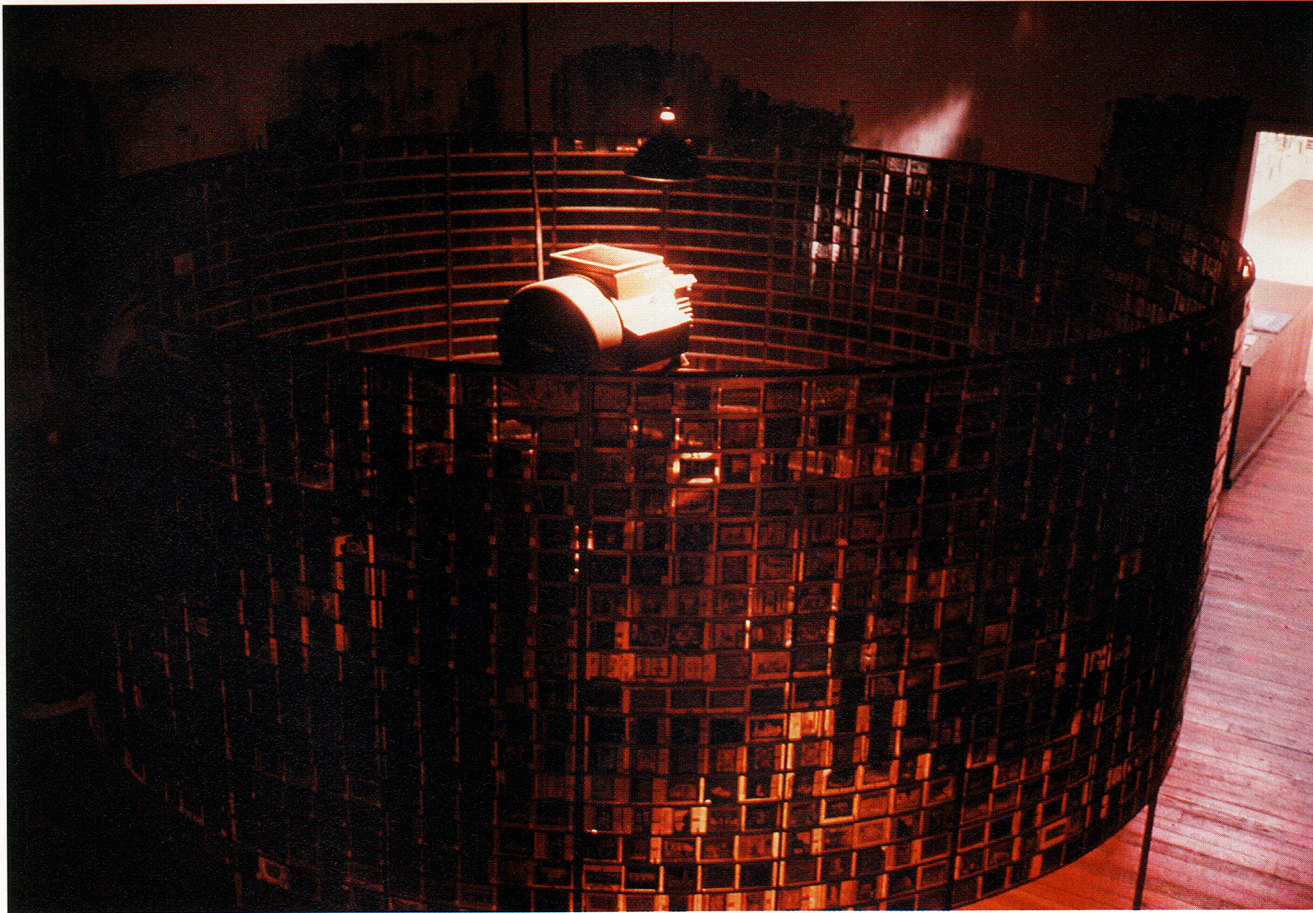
stallation posits another kind of space: this is an anechoic chamber, where faceted surfaces painted violet-black suck sound into oblivion. A quiet space for contemplation and discussion emerges apart from the hyperreality of the electronic panopticon.

In many respects, IOOA's installations constitute an allegorical mode of interpreting and making architecture. The allegorical sensibility (theorized as a tendency of contemporary artistic practice by Craig Owens, with reference to Walter Benjamin's writings) resists the affirmation of universal, timeless values—the work of the symbol—to instead emphasize the contingency and lively imperfection of meaning. Where allegory operates, historical time is understood neither as unified nor progressive, but rather as an ongoing interplay of catastrophe, renewal and fragmentation. Values and codes are never stabilized, but made strange.

An allegorical architecture forces site, program and technique to yield their constitutive role, their grounding

function, and present themselves as a spatial-ideological construct—a force field of accrued effects. IOOA's installations create such a field. Both obsolescent and highly advanced materials—some of which come from outside the proper realm of architecture—are appropriated and reframed. The projects further invoke an extraordinary play of texts, cannily referring to other spaces, writings, rituals and technologies (eg television) and investigating their challenge to architecture.

Everywhere in these installations, messiness prevails—a precise refusal to mask or resolve the tensions of architectural space. IOOA makes mixtures, not solutions. Their projects recall the final montage of Antonioni's *L'eclisse* where, for roughly seven minutes, the camera glides across the puddles, cracks and gutters of Roman streets, luxuriating in the floating muck. It is a glorious elegy.



Photography: Richard Barnes

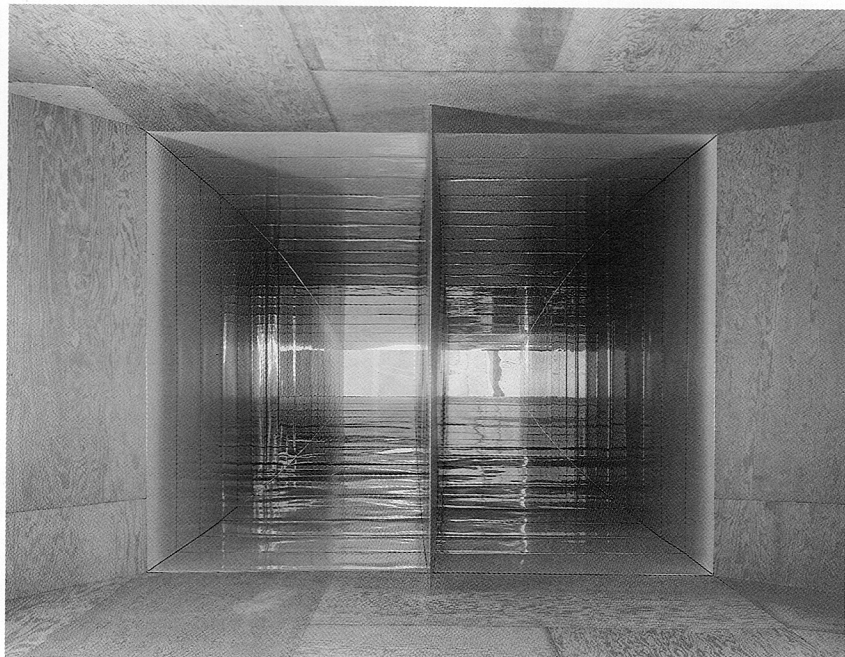
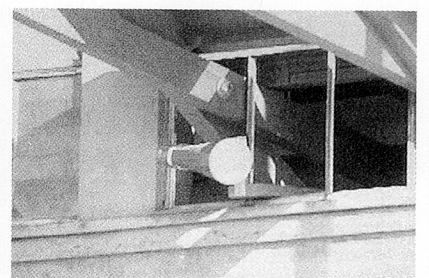
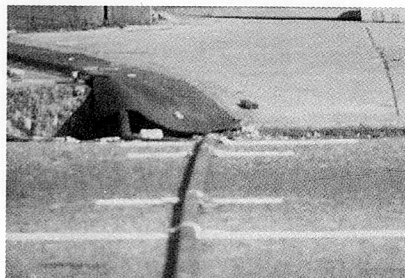
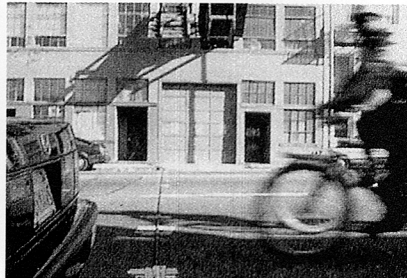
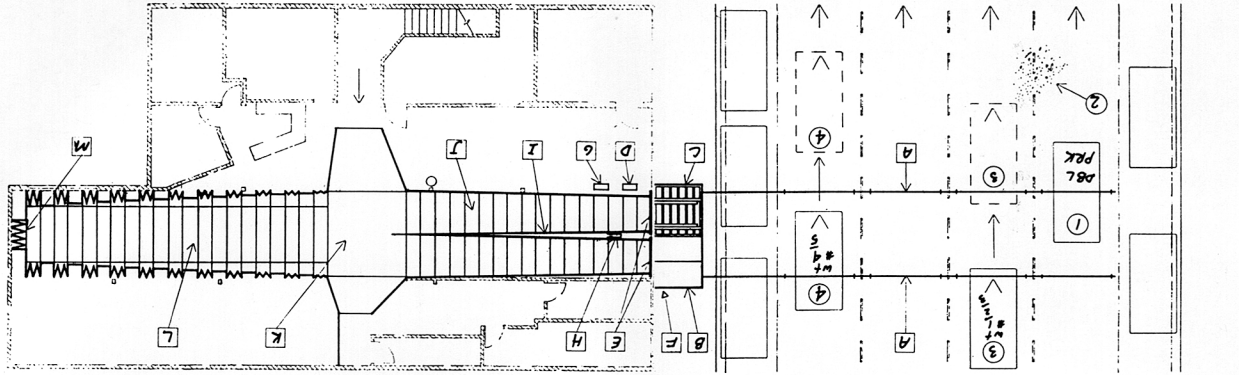


Photo: Bobby Neel Adams

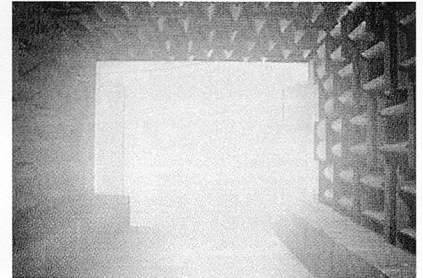
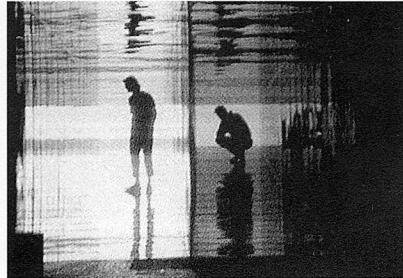
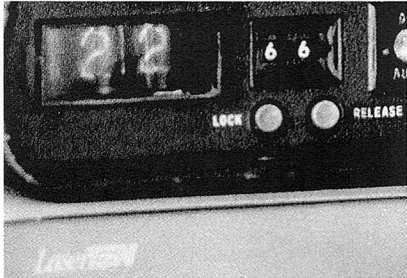
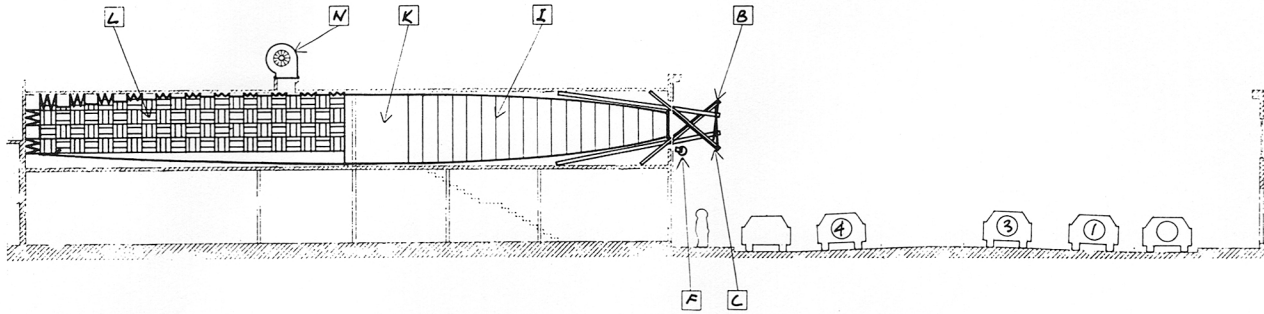


Photo: Bobby Neel Adams