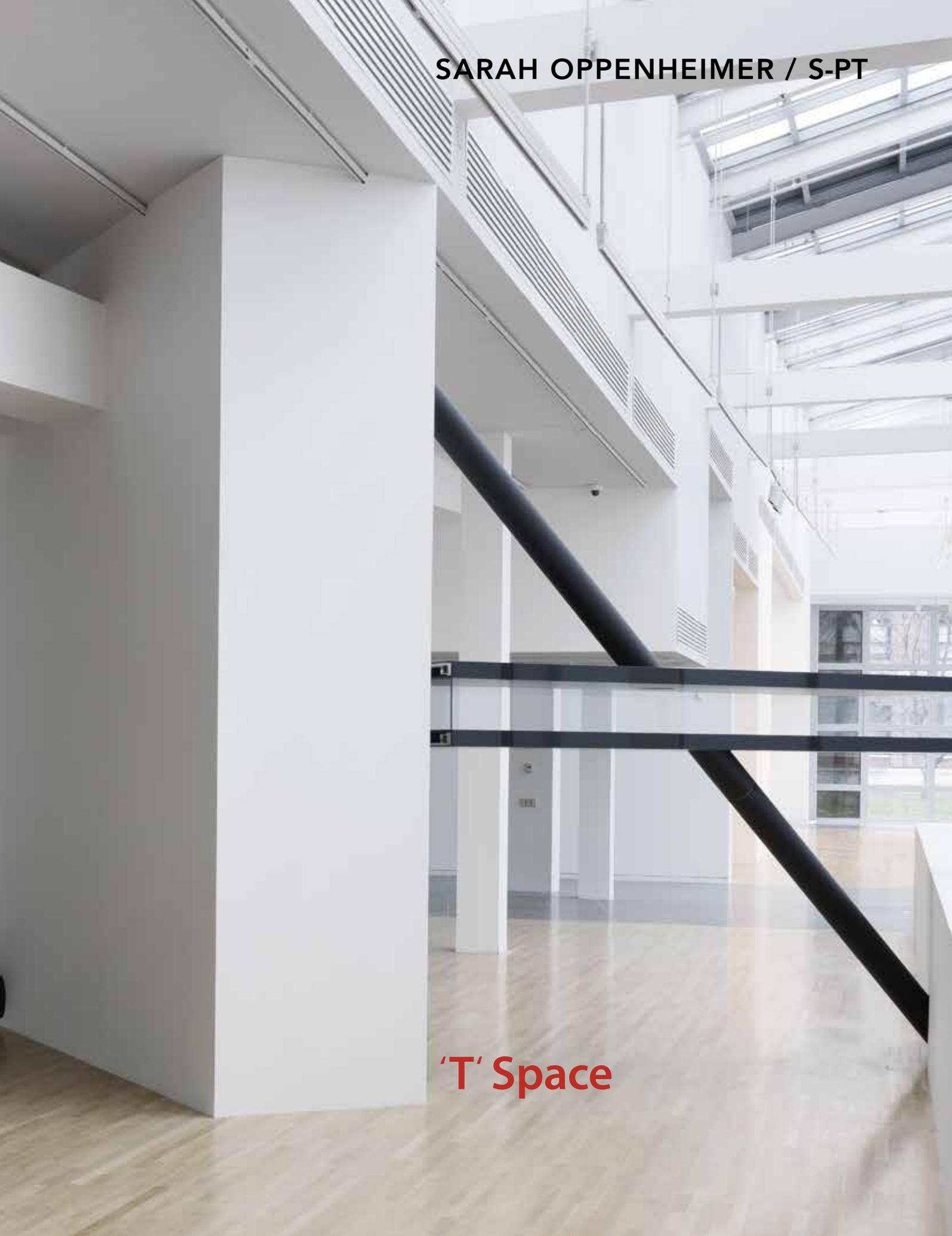


SARAH OPPENHEIMER / S-PT

'T' Space



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JULY 8 – AUGUST 6, 2017

'T' Space
RHINEBECK



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THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION

Sanford Kwinter

Who has not experienced the unsettling *feeling* of travelling through space even while motionless and firmly parked in place? It is enough for an object—a bus or a plane or a car just next to our own—as long as it is larger than the frame through which it is viewed, to move against that frame (and hence against the durable environment within which we as perceivers are lodged) for it to pitch us into a minor crisis of sensory and orientational derangement. We respond to this perceptual puzzle with a reflexive startle and fretfully try to re-situate ourselves in a wider flow whose parameters we can, only after agonizing seconds, establish and pin down. We resolve the cognitive crisis by re-fixing the boundaries within which our sensations of self are understood. Only in such moments do we access the work of perception as a *labor of drawing*, of drawing frames and boundaries to alter or accommodate how we place ourselves meaningfully in the world.

Whether it is we ourselves who are in motion, or something that moves in relation to us, is for the physicist, a problem of *inertial or reference frames*. But it is a problem for us as well. How do we anchor ourselves in our world? How do we capture and use the stability of the environment to grasp the motion of an object in it, and how do we order objects, motions, and environments in relation to our ever-perambulating, ever-exploring selves? For every object in real experience belongs to a *de facto* “three-body problem,” the intransigent equation that seeks to predict the movement of three bodies in continuous gravitational interaction, but never actually does so?¹ Although these seemingly simple correlations happen every moment of every day in experience, they cannot be rationally modeled.²

Every living thing—no, every *thing* altogether!—is a reflex perceiver, a sentient registrar of differences developing in its surround. It is a wonder therefore that humans ever acceded to the fable that *perspectival* vision can explain what we *do*. We do not in fact receive and digest a rigid reality in rigidly organized perspectival space, but rather probe, sample, and draw inferences; we *palpate* our world with all of our senses; we draw, re-draw, and actively *invent* the relations that connect us to it. We continually shift the boundaries and frames in order to produce uses and

behaviors, and to understand where we are in the world and what we can do with it. *To perceive is to modify something outside us by modifying something inside.*

Now, there is no perception without movement: The senses neither see, nor hear, nor feel what does not move or flow. Perfectly still objects are not perceptible without the saccadic (tremulous) movement of the eyes, which occurs at speed up to 900 angular degrees per second, a speed more rapid than the eyes themselves can discern. (We cannot, for example, see another person's saccades.)

What is at play here, beyond the rudimentary modality of movement, is the living orchestration and intuition of change. A philosopher might use the term "difference" to gather the problem under the single heading of *saliency*, for change in what happens around us is what matters and sticks out. (As the godfather of cybernetic awareness, Gregory Bateson famously expressed it, it is above all "the difference that makes a difference" to which the universe, and its sentient inhabitants, are attuned.)

Perception is the pursuit and organization of distinctions that make up the world that is unique to every organism: places and moments make a difference when they stand out from the evenness of the surround. Ontologically speaking, they are points in a (space-time) flow where transformations or conjugations do or can be made to take place, where something connects to something else or opens a wormhole into a new functional reality that did not exist before. Saliency—what stands out—is never a given. It does not precede perception but is produced within it. I hold this to be the essential lesson of Sarah Oppenheimer's work.

Our libraries are filled with reflections on rational vision—on the 'homogeneous, isotropic and continuous' space³ beloved of modern "instrumentalist" thought. Oppenheimer's work has long been treated as the production of paradoxes that mine and shatter the complacencies of mathematical vision, as the orchestration of an essential conflict between the subjectively "felt" and the objectively "known." But this was never the work's primary concern.

What we can grasp clearly today is a progression in her work from mainly conjunctive operations (manipulations of occluding interior surfaces to unseal them and let them seep into other outlying ones) to kinetic appliances whose preternatural displacements and flow *schedule* perceptual ruptures in time. There is now a deliberate engagement with the mysteries distributed "now here, now there" throughout being, as *pregnances* in space.⁴ By pregnancy I refer to the poisedness,



volatility, and excitability of the worldly surround according to which nearly every point is endowed with transformative (morphogenetic) potential.

The apparatuses presented at 'T' Space—studies for full architectural-scale artworks—display rotational phenomena of an apparently simple yet actually mystifying kind. We know from the visibly symmetrical setup—rectilinear slabs mounted on a 45-degree rotating spindle—that we have to do with the purely linear motion of a body. And yet what erupts before our eyes confounds our ability to track the motion as a simple progression or change of degree. What presents itself to our senses is a transformation *in kind*. One reason for this is that what is rotated around the diagonal axis is not simply a “rigid body” but the virtual rotation of one dynamic axis around another—two coordinated motions in one—where the axis itself serves now as the moving boundary, a halo-like envelope adhering to, and travelling with the object. The effect here, like the above-mentioned experience of the ambiguous movement of an adjacent vehicle, is to induce a baling sensory climax and a need to reset our perceptual frame to accommodate what we think we know about the state of the world: That an object in our purview has been simply moved and not transformed. And yet, that is not what we experience.

We in fact experience a confounding and magical transformation, reminiscent of the topological burlesques of a high-board diver, in which an envelope of compound action—a performance envelope—mutates from a vertical to a horizontal disposition, as if an integer were literally transformed before us from a post into a lintel (and back) *without altering its performance*; that is, without showing how it engages the shifting “moment” of its gravitational load. And this is a second paradox that enters into the game: we sense the incongruous movement of gravity and weight around—not a metric “axis” but a free and performative one. The “float” and the turning effect of such works, when placed in a real context at full scale, would punctuate space and embed a transient drawing in it. (One need simply track the corners and black edges of the slabs as they carve their seemingly improvisatory parabolic sweeps.)

The delicate poisedness of the unambiguously weighty prism-forms brings their internal tension to the fore—there is suspension through equipoise—and this grounds attention not onto the mechanical pivot (which is rendered absent and void as the glass volumes vacate the place where the spindle would declare its fulcrum or moment point) but onto abstract



or immaterial points in space where intensive values, such as tipping points, change and actively transform what is around them: these are like singularities in a phase space, places in space and time, where changes happen without apparent cause as if conjured by angels.

Such places are remarkable; and although they may well be part of everyday experience, they are rarely accounted for. The observation of such a singularity brought the great perceptual psychologist James Jerome Gibson to the study of how organisms use light to tap their environments for advantage. As a child he noticed that when peering out the back of a train or automobile that the *ambient optic array*—space itself—would simultaneously compress (at the center) and expand (at the edges): objects shrank at the focal point but space rushed in explosively at the periphery of the visual field. Likewise, points in space converge or approach at drastically different rates as we move inside our milieus, depending on their distance from us. We grasp information and organize ourselves in our surround based on the direct but unnoticed intuition of *relative* values, not absolute ones, as one thing progressively occludes or reveals another, as rates of change differ from moment to moment and place to place, either in conformity with, or against routine expectation.

Herein lies the fundamentally musical—mystical, psychotropic—inclination of Oppenheimer’s work: it single-mindedly seeks the *thresholds* of things. It operates at the front where experience is unstable and easily bifurcates, to be frustrated, confirmed or, as in music, brought into free contact with what is not anticipated in our psychic and perceptual flow. Like music, her work operates through the endlessly surprising disclosure of unseen and unfelt orders of things—*anomalies* not necessarily in reality but certainly in experience—to teach us that these openings onto enchantment are always proximate and everywhere around us—all one has to do is pierce the veil.

1 The three bodies referred to by physicists and mathematicians are nearly always that of the earth, the sun and the moon. The problem famously has no solution. In the last years of the 19th century, Poincaré showed that there was an infinite number of periodic solutions, hence no regular pattern. On the homoclinic tangles that resulted from his intractable mapping solution, see Ivar Ekeland, *Mathematics and the Unexpected* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

2 The classic mathematics professor’s apothegm after pitching a piece of chalk at the student, who then reflexively catches it: “Bravo!—you just solved an insoluble partial differential equation in real time.”

3 Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1997, 1924).

4 I borrow both the terms “saliency” and “pregnancy” from the mathematician Rene Thom, *Esquisse d’une sémiophysique: Physique aristotélicienne et théorie des catastrophes* (Paris: Intereditions, 1988). The phrase “now here, now there” is a common translation of the latin “nunc hinc, nunc illinc” from Lucretius who used the phrase to describe the random distribution of the singularizing “clinamens” or “swerves” that are the triggers for all form and event in the universe. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*.







SARAH OPPENHEIMER: "ZIPS" TO "SWITCH"

Steven Holl

6/11/2017

While reading the catalogue from her recent Wexner Center exhibition, it hit me that in the term "switch" she uses for her Spatial Artworks, there is a distant connection to Barnett Newman's "zips".

On June 8th when I had the chance to visit her studio in Long Island City, she was enthusiastic about this observation. While her "switch"

works to transform space, linking inner to outer, void to mass, up to down, Barnett Newman's "zips" link the top to the bottom of his large paintings. Newman instructed the viewer to stand 18 inches away from his canvas allowing its large color surface to completely dominate one's field of view. With peripheral vision full from side to side, zips turn the head up and down, top of the horizon to bottom. Newman used masking tape to create these paintings, the pulling of the tape after the paint dried connecting the process; but his were much deeper concerns.

The great philosopher-critic Arthur Danto argued for the importance of this period of art-making since there emerged at this time a deep skepticism regarding philosophy itself (after Ludwig Wittgenstein proclaimed, "most propositions and questions that have been written about philosophical matters are not false but senseless"). Danto saw that the hope mid-20th century was that art could provide meanings that religion and philosophy could no longer provide.

After Danto in his book *Unnatural Wonders* takes on the likes of Jeff Koons, Paul McCarthy and others, he refers to Barnett Newman:

"If there was any group of figures who tried to deal with the deepest concepts of the spirit, it would not have been the professional philosophers at all but the great painters—the Abstract Expressionists who in the words of Barnett Newman aspired to find "through painting a path to the absolute."

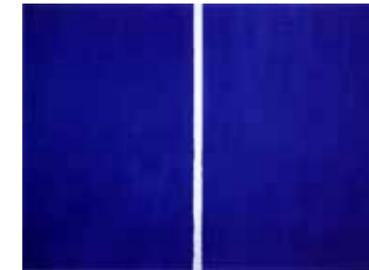
The rotational in Sarah Oppenheimer's work also seems to link to our earthly dependence on the rotation of the earth and its axial tilt of 23.5 degrees (the ecliptic plane). This tilt both prompts temperature extremes and keeps seasons moderate. Oppenheimer's works involve dynamic experiences of tilt-angle rotation, from flattening space to the spatial oblique.

Thinking of the Earth's axial tilt provokes thoughts of its 1000 mph rotation at the equator. This rotation grows slower as one moves north and south (700 mph for instance in parts of Alaska) and slows to zero at the poles. If we merge thoughts of Oppenheimer's space—space in the artistic sense—with space in the scientific sense, what do we arrive at?

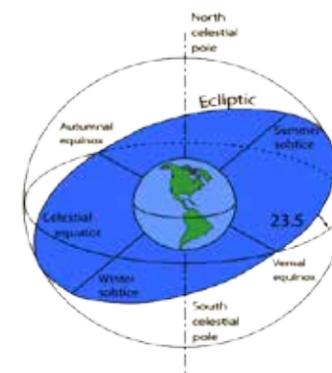
At a famous aesthetics conference attended by art critics and philosophers in the 1960s, Barnett Newman proclaimed, "Aesthetics is for art what ornithology is for the birds."



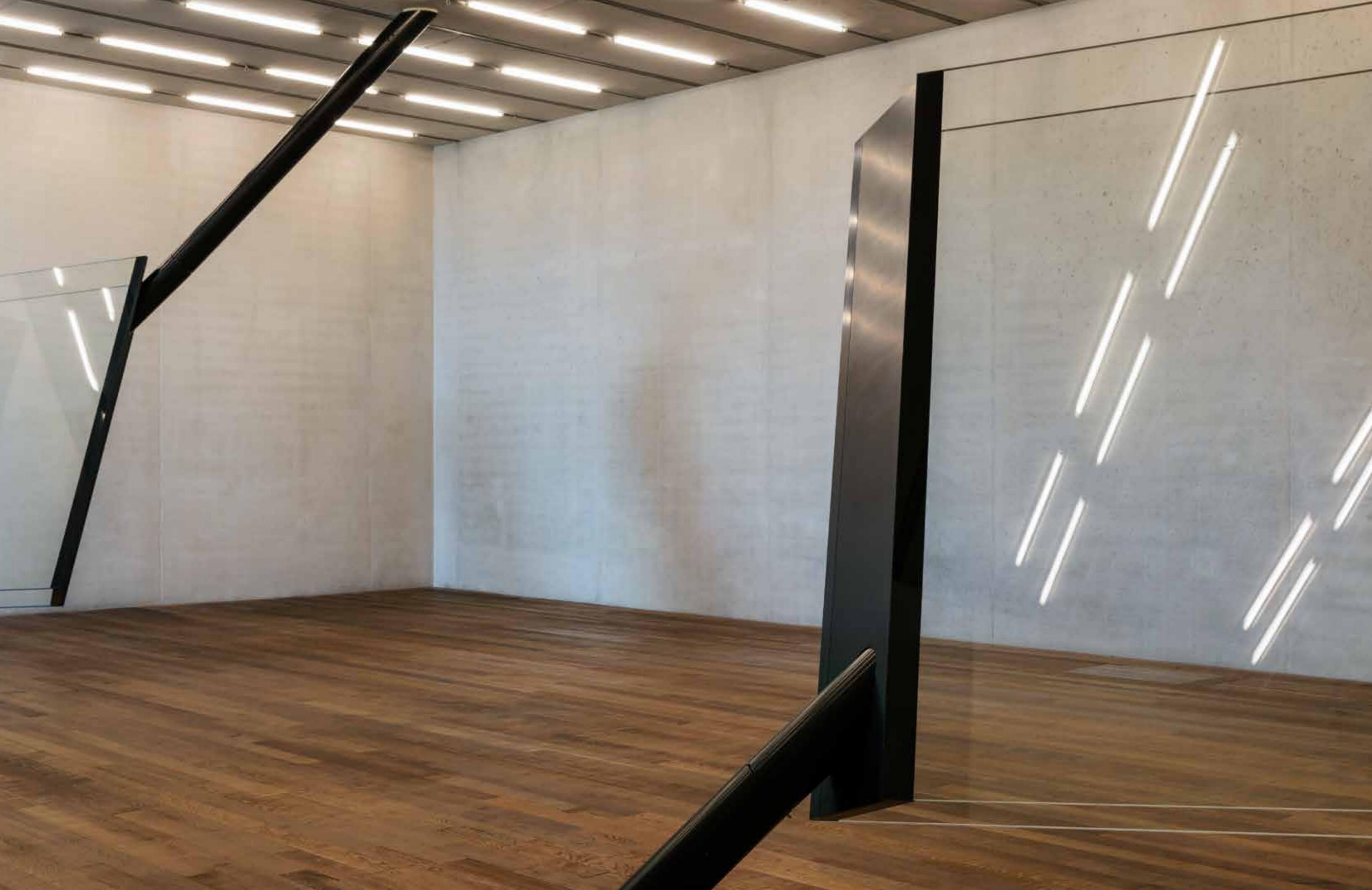
"BE I", BARNETT NEWMAN, 1949, 93 1/8" x 75 1/8"



ONEMENT VI, BARNETT NEWMAN, 1953, 8' X 10'







We are honored to exhibit the artwork of Sarah Oppenheimer in 'T' Space's seventh season. Sincere thanks goes to Sarah for an inspiring and thought-provoking exhibition. We are grateful to Sanford Kwinter and Steven Holl for their insights, Jim Holl for the elegant design of the catalogue, Dimitra Tsachrelia and Javier Gomez for their kind assistance.

We greatly appreciate our Patrons, Sponsors, Donors, Friends and Emerging Supporters for their contributions that enable 'T' Space to be a sustainable project and a vital force in the Hudson Valley and beyond.

Susan Wides
Director | Curator
'T' Space

