



DOVE BRADSHAW

JAN HENLE





# DOVE BRADSHAW

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Opposite  
Contingency, detail  
1994  
Silver, liver of sulfur on flax paper  
37  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 29 inches  
Collection of Drs. Ellen and John Brown

Cover  
Contingency, detail  
1994/96  
Silver, liver of sulfur on linen  
82 x 66 inches  
Collection of the artist

Special thanks to:  
Kit Bradshaw, William Anastasi, Barbara Schwartz, Sandra Gering  
Renata and Sidney Shapiro, Marianna Baer  
*Dove Bradshaw*

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Contingency

1994/96

Silver, liver of sulfur on flax paper

37 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 29 inches

Collection of the artist



*Dove Bradshaw*

By Mark Swed

S

1996

Sulfur, varnish on linen

91 ¼ x 76 inches

Art, Marcel Duchamp cautioned, is as mortal as you or I; it dies. Taking his usual cunning pleasure in the shock value of revelation, he suggested that after around thirty years a painting loses its esthetic “smell,” its sense of connections with the world around it, with its time and place. But a painting will also lose—in fifty years? In seventy-five years? In a century?—its looks. Unless drastic artificial measures are taken to keep it apart from the elements, from sunlight and the atmosphere and weather and other life-giving forces, a painting changes, ages, decays. Ironically, such art, so often meant to describe, evoke, celebrate, illuminate nature cannot live in nature. It cannot withstand the elements.

To die means, of course, that art must live, and that is the real significance of Duchamp’s revelation, since we rarely witness a life’s changes in art (even kinetic sculpture tends to operate within a steady state). We expect permanence. We ask art to provide security, be it as an investment that will grow in value, as a record of history, or maybe as nothing more than a comforting place to which we know we can always return. If it changes too much we try to restore it to its original condition.

Dove Bradshaw’s art changes faster than most, and that is its point and its splendor. To restore it would be to ruin it. Hers is not a kinetic but a chemical art. She works in inorganic chemistry as if it were organic, acknowledging indeterminacy as central to the working of the natural world, to a universe that expands. The laws of entropy tell us that nothing can revert to its initial state, that everything always gets more complex. But too often we view unmanageable). Bradshaw, on the other hand, is interested in an art that exults in the excellence of nature as it is, in chance and randomness and the irreversibility of time. And by doing so she becomes a remarkable nature painter. She creates no illusions.

Bradshaw sets natural processes in motion and then withdraws, observing their results. The Contingency series, (of which several pieces appear at MOCA), demonstrates unpredictable chemistry in action. Canvases (or linen or flax) incorporate unstable chemicals that respond over time to changes in light and humidity as a record of the process of oxidation. In the Indeterminacy series stones bleed into stones leaving haunting patterns.

MARCEL DUCHAMP  
The Bride Stripped Bare by  
Her Bachelors, Even  
Or The Large Glass  
1915-23  
Philadelphia Museum of Art  
Bequest of Katherine S. Drier



In the simplest sense, Bradshaw's work resembles controlled experiments. The Contingency paintings, for instance, are a study in the reactions of liver of sulfur (sulfurated potash) with silver. The activity is complicated and unpredictable, and part of the richness of the results comes from controlling the possibilities for complication. The first works in the series, begun in 1984, were created by laying handmade cotton paper flat on the floor and then treating it with gesso and varnish before adding the silver leaf and finally pouring on liver of sulfur. The method of applying the liver of sulfur affects the outcome; Bradshaw pours on the edge of the paper and allows the liquid to travel randomly while the imperfections of the paper create small puddles.

When Bradshaw' turned to linen and canvas, the different materials added new variables and a large scale. In need of better ventilation, she moved from inside her studio to the roof for the application of chemicals, and that brought new chance elements, Her roof's uneven floor communicates irregularities onto the surface of the painting. And the chemical reactions vary with the number of coatings of liver of sulfur. But then it is up to time and nature, once the atmosphere conditions—especially light, humidity and temperature—begin to act upon the painting. Even the style of mounting can affect it. When framed under glass the chemistry is much less active than if left open to the elements.



The changes occur on two time scales. There is the immediate action of the chemicals—perhaps a sudden turbulence of greens or turquoise patterns that face within twenty-four hours or less. Then there is the slower, evolutionary transformation in which the environment becomes catalyst. It is the ambiguous experience of this slower change that is the more interesting of the two. A painting may change radically over a period of months or years, and the shift in appearance cannot be wholly observed in one viewing. But we *know* that chemistry is at work, we understand that what we see is a record of a process and we see in the works their impermanence and, through their challenging the notion of an art object as reliably one thing, their impertinence.

In making the Contingency series Bradshaw is both impartial observer and partial art maker. The artist may withdraw from the work once the chemistry has begun, and the oxidation process may be unpredictable, but the paintings come across invariably as beautiful objects nonetheless. Still, Bradshaw says that she cannot gauge exactly why one painting will come out a particular color. Some are copper, others gray. But there is always something in these works that easily reminds us of natural settings. The sulfur leaves a salt residue that speckles the painting; the coppers are like the sandy earth reflecting the golden light of sunset; the grays have the translucent texture and the grain of a thick early morning fog.

Bradshaw, who was born in 1949 and grew up in New York City, traces her interest in chemical processes to a childhood fascination with both medieval alchemy and natural alchemy, such as the sulfur pools at Yellowstone. She says she never set out to break down the boundaries of art. Rather she reacted to the natural instability of materials and to the liberating influence of Duchamp and John Cage, artists who rigorously pursued chance and indeterminacy in their work. Their example encouraged Bradshaw to connect art with life and nature around her.

It was Duchamp who labored from 1915 to 1923 on his major work, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (or *the Large Glass*), and then found that it was “improved” when it accidentally broke, leaving a spider web of cracks when mended. Bradshaw had a similar epiphany in 1969. While at school she set about to cast an eggshell in bronze. The mold didn’t fill with metal, but she liked it incomplete better than perfectly cast. That, Bradshaw says, was her first introduction to workings of chance. And from then on her art became a reconciliation with two seemingly opposing sides of her personality. One is as an elegant minimalist, with a taste for purity and refinement. The other is as a detached observer transfixed by the messy, unpredictable processes of nature, the artist who once created an installation piece, *Plain Air*, that involved the nesting of live birds.

Throughout the 1970s, Bradshaw worked with non-intentional sculpture, often taking her cue from Duchamp and later from the noted American post-Duchampian conceptual artist, William Anastasi, whom she met in 1974 and with whom she has lived ever since. Duchamp has continued to play upon Bradshaw’s development though the years as she has rethought the relations between her art and the wider world. In making *the Large Glass*, Duchamp deliberately allowed dust to collect on the piece over a period of several months (later carefully graded it in concentration before fixing with varnish, photographed

by Man Ray, and the resulting images entitled *Dust Breeding* [1920],<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to create a “greenhouse, in which transparent colors, as ephemeral as perfumes, will emerge, flourish, ripen, and decay like flowers and fruits.”<sup>2</sup> In Bradshaw’s *Carbon Removals*, dust, too, is the topic. Here, carbon paper is placed over a clear adhesive sheet which has been exposed to dust. By rubbing the paper, carbon is removed from every place except where the dust lies, and the resulting carbon paper reveals dust’s impression.

She has also, with her large *Contingency* book, taken literally Duchamp’s dictum from his essay “The Creative Act,” that it is the viewer who finishes any work of art. Bradshaw applied wax, varnish, and silver to sheets of linen paper then sandwiched them between other chemically active works leaving them to oxidize, buried in her studio, untouched, for two years. The resulting book of the bound pages, epic in size and imposingly archaic-like as if it was a Medieval, mystical tome, contains the writings and drawings of chemistry from the bleedings of her other works onto these pages. There exudes a strong whiff of alchemy here though in reverse, especially in the way the silver turns gold briefly during its first oxidation before becoming black. On display, the book continues to change; the open pages oxidize, the closed pages bleed. A viewer’s breath or a page-turner’s fingers affect and, in the Duchampian sense, “finish” the work.

But Bradshaw would not have reached the point where outside life could so directly pour into her work without the example of Cage. She met the composer in 1977 and that led to a close personal friendship that lasted until his death in 1992. In 1984, Bradshaw and Anastasi became joint Artistic Advisors to the Merce Cunningham Dance Company of which Cage was the founding Music Director. Bradshaw says that Cage, who made his work through the disciplined application of chance operations, instilled in her the ability to “let go,” to let a work of art become whatever it will once a process has been set in motion. All the art world was, for Cage, a stage, and he regularly proposed that it was never inapt for visual work to pursue music’s fluid state.

Bradshaw points to Cage’s seminal 1952 work, *4’33”*, during which a performer sits silent for the duration of the score, as stimulating her own efforts to increasingly view the environment as her stage. With *4’33”* Cage found a way to both maintain the frame (namely the proscenium of the stage) yet open up a musical composition to the atmosphere of the theater. The sounds heard are those of the environment—external noises, audience noises.

Cage had been as influenced by Duchamp’s readymade esthetic—art is the paying attention to what is around us—as he had been by his fascination with nothingness, a concept that had arisen from his studies of Zen. Cage discovered that there was no such thing as nothingness, that there was always something in nothing. He visited a Harvard anechoic chamber, in which all external sounds are deadened, and found, not silence, but his won bodily sounds filling the sonic void. He learned from Robert Rauschenberg’s white

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<sup>1</sup> Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art In Transit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 67.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hamilton, “The Large Glass,” in *Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Anne d’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973), 66.



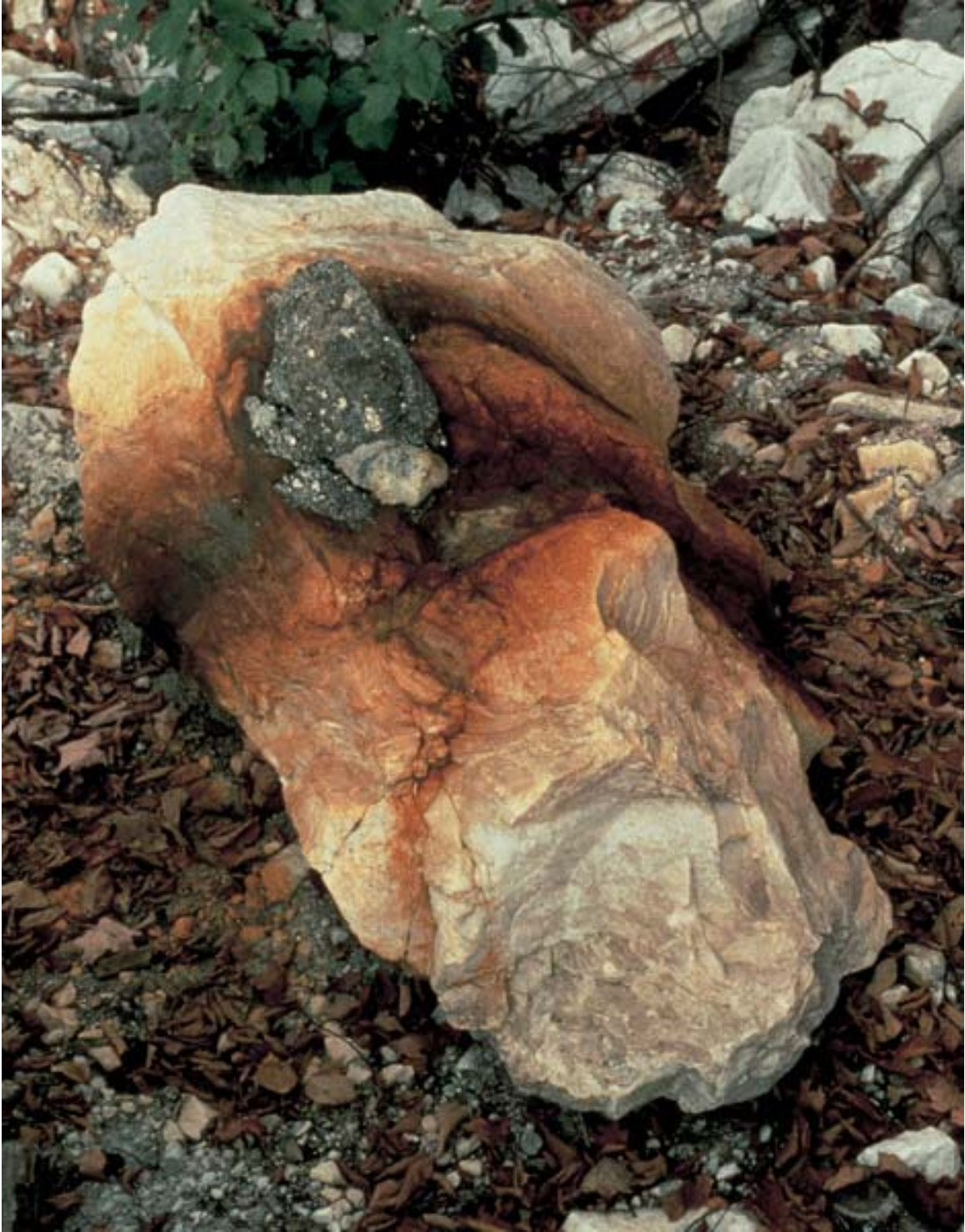
Without Title [Carbon Removal]

1992

Carbon paper

6 ½ x 5 ½ inches

Collection of Edward Albee



Indeterminacy XV  
*Activated July 17, 1997*  
Vermont marble, pyrite  
*24 x 96 x 46 inches*  
Collection of the artist

paintings, exhibited at Black Mountain College in 1951, that they, too, were not blank but rather became what Rauschenberg later termed “airports” for shadows and dust mites.

But it is the Indeterminacy series, the latest, and the grandest-scaled, of Bradshaw’s environmental sculpture that most fully embrace Cagean notions. In his work, Cage would regularly set up a situation and then allow chance procedures to fill in the specific details so that he could be surprised by the results. Bradshaw’s idea for her Indeterminacy series seems elegantly simple but, like all elegant ideas, it was hard won, in this instance through rigorous experimentation with various materials. After many failed experiments, she learned that pyrite will leach onto certain stones like marble and produce complex stains on the surface.<sup>5</sup> Thus Bradshaw creates a spectacular sense of flux even with heavy, immobile stones.

The indeterminacy comes from the availability of materials, the composition of the pyrite, and the weather. The pyrite might disappear in as quickly as a few years or last a century. Four kinds of stone are used. Two are marbles; one is the famous white stone that comes from Carrara, Italy; the other is variegated and is quarried from a vein four miles long in Vermont. Sandstone and limestone were also activated by pyrite. A geologist supplies the pyrite, mailing whatever deposits he finds, and the artist applies the rocks as they come, never cutting. The pyrite must sit comfortably on the larger stone—it is not attached, since a pin or glue would ultimately leave its own trace.

Begun directly after Cage’s death in 1992, these bleeding sculptures stand, then, as monument to the composer’s favorite concept. But they do more. They remind us that stone, like all nature, is alive. That can be an unsettling thought—we tend to think of the “performance” of stone as disaster, of earthquake or avalanche. But when we see the gentle beauty of mineral bleeding, we have to change our thinking.

And therein lies the greatest challenge of Dove Bradshaw’s work, as she moves further and further away from making esthetic choices and challenges us to face nature more and more directly, to find beauty where we didn’t expect it. Even John Cage had a surprising reluctance to let go of his own preferences. Given a *Contingency* painting by the artist, Cage grew attached to its initial state and became upset when its appearance changed. He also became upset at his upset, but that led him to a profound solution. “Yes, it’s amazing,” he told the art critic, Thomas McEvelley, in a discussion of Bradshaw’s work. “If I, so to speak, change with [the painting], then I can change with the world that I’m living in, which is doing the same thing.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Cage and Thomas McEvelley, “A Conversation Between John Cage and Thomas McEvelley,” in *Dove Bradshaw: Works 1969-1993* (New York): Sandra Gering Gallery), 8.



Without Title [Carbon Removal]

1992

Carbon paper

6 ½ x 5 ½ inches

Collection of John Cage



Without Title [Carbon Removal]  
*1981*  
Carbon Paper  
*4 7/8 x 4 1/4*  
Collection of the artist



Without Title [Carbon Removal]

1995

Carbon paper

6 ½ x 5 ½ inches

Collection of Barry Schwabsky and Carol Szymansky





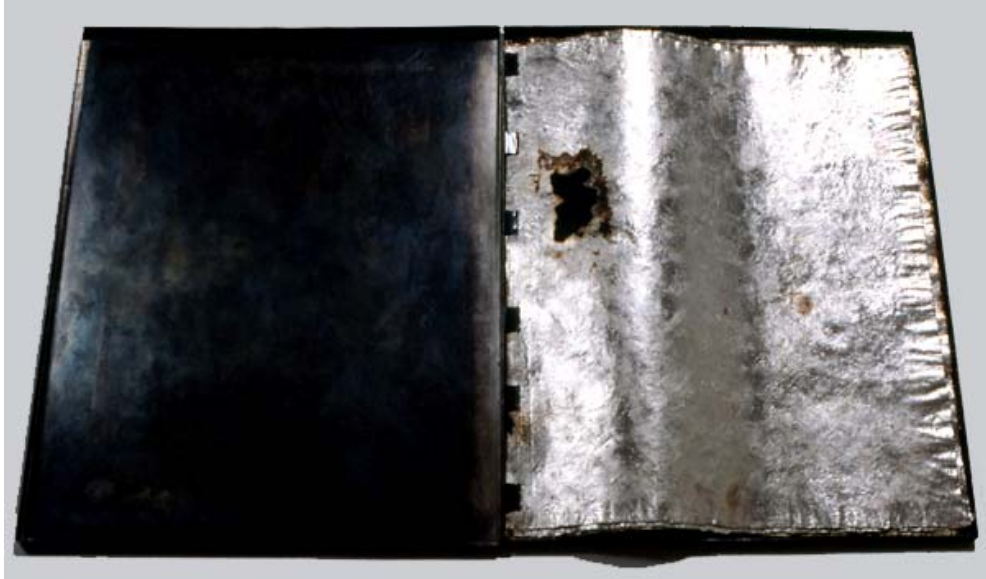
Contingency

1992/93

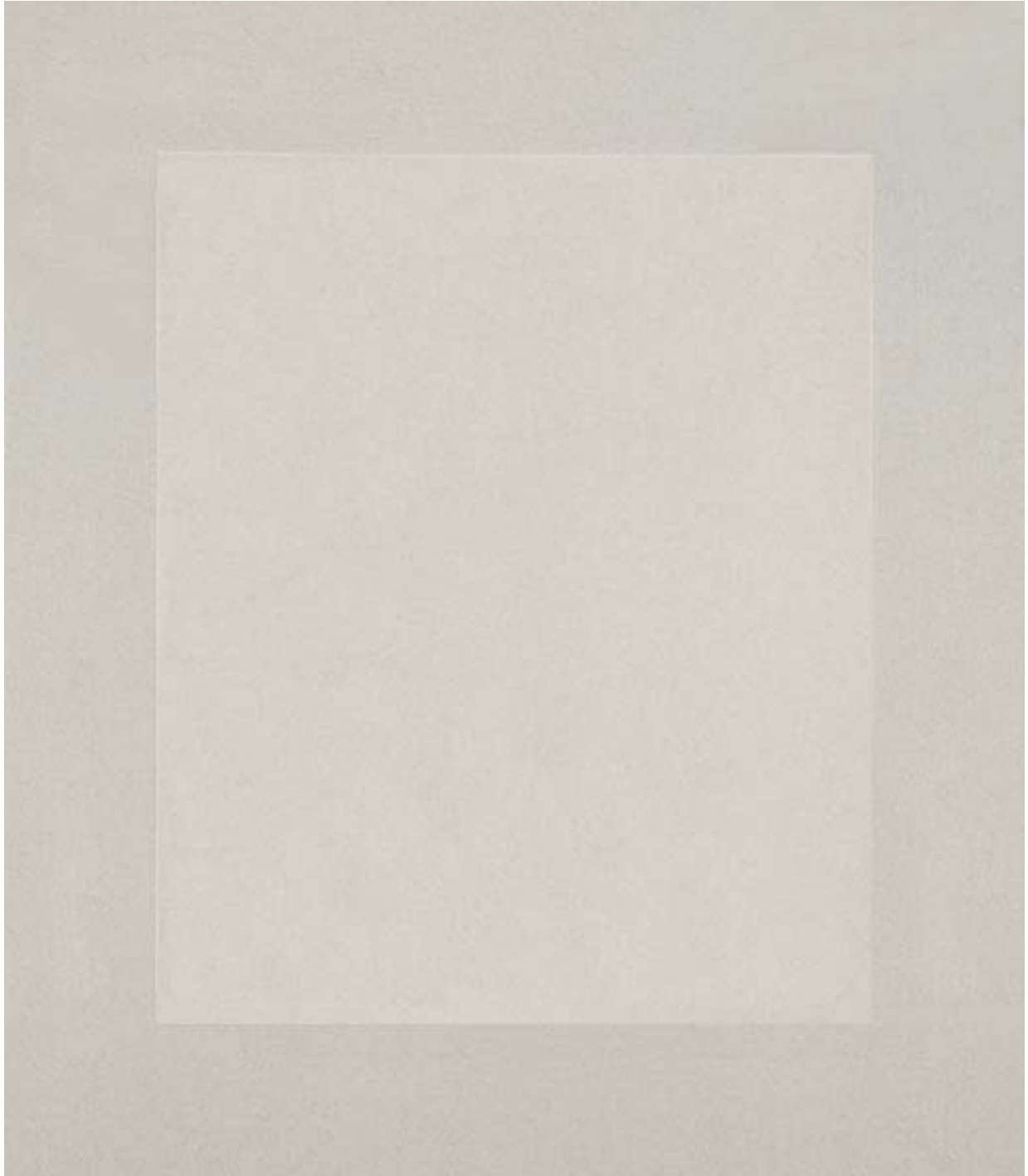
Silver, liver of sulfur, varnish on linen

82 x 66 inches

Collection Portia and Mohammed Yakub



Contingency [Book]  
1954/97  
Silver, liver of sulfur, beeswax on linen paper  
Bound with steel clips  
*Paper: 26 3/8 x 42 3/4 inches*  
*Box (cold rolled steel): 27 x 46 1/2 inches (open)*  
Collection of the artist



Ground

1988

Plaster on wall

32 x 24 inches

Collection of the Mattress Factor Museum, Pittsburg



Contingency

1993

Silver, liver of sulfur on linen

82 x 66 inches

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Gift of Barbara Schwartz in memory of Eugene M. Schwartz



Contingency Pour  
1994/96  
Silver, liver of sulfur on linen  
82 x 66 inches  
Collection of the artist



Indeterminacy XVIII  
*Activated July 18, 1997*  
Vermont marble, pyrite  
*24 x 37 x 30 inches*  
Collection of Fields Sculpture Park, Ghent, New York



Indeterminacy II

*Activated June 15, 1995*

Vermont marble, pyrite

*17 x 54 x 38 inches*

Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles



Passion

1994

Copper, ammonium chloride and copper sulfate solution

23 1/2 x 4 inches

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Purchased with funds provided by Renata and Sidney Shapiro





*In the aged rocks and primeval forests so exhilarating to the romantic poets and artists resided crucial clues to Creation. It was the artists' task, as much as the scientists', to discover and interpret the truths of nature.*

Barbara Novak<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 49.

## *Afterword: Dove Bradshaw's Spacetime*

By Julie Lazar

Sunlight on the Hudson River connects the luminescence of Thomas Cole's paintings to Dan Flavin's fluorescent sculptures. Thunderclaps over Walden Pond connect Henry David Thoreau's writings to compositions of John Cage's favorite jack hammer sounds from Sixth Avenue. The flow of Mierle Laderman Ukeles's waste reclamation projects connect to the bleeding pyrite of Dove Bradshaw's stone sculptures. What connects them to us?

We are all comprised of ephemeral material, and there is an art to living.

Dove Bradshaw experiments with the seemingly invisible operations of nature, and in doing so, mines our primordial memories of chaos, birth, and death. Our awareness of the constancy of change in life is heightened by the focus that her Contingency and Indeterminacy series provide. Just as we can not freeze or frame any action in these particular art works, we can not isolate or cling to any single living movement in any specific place or time.

In a touching memoir about the invisibility of his father's life and death, Paul Auster wrote, "Unknown to himself, he had been burrowing down to a place of almost vanished memory, and now that something had surfaced, he could not even guess how long the excavation had taken."<sup>2</sup> These artists encourage us to raise our head above the surface of life, to be mindful of valuable discoveries found in accumulating but fleeting moments.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Auster, *the Invention of Solitude* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 80.





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