

Bernie
MILLER

June 14 - August 24, 1986

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By Philip Monk and Barbara Fischer

Art Gallery of Ontario
Musée des beaux-arts de l'Ontario
Toronto, Canada

Sponsored by Molson Breweries

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Cover:

No. 4

Future Use (detail) 1985

Steel, styrofoam, light fixtures, various found objects

Collection of the artist

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Sponsor's Foreword

Bernie Miller's works challenge the mind and captivate the imagination. His clever sculptural installations play with what we know. They command us to think. They make us respond.

It gives us great pleasure to join the Art Gallery of Ontario in sponsoring this exhibition of recent works by such an intriguing young Canadian artist.

We are also delighted that our specially commissioned outdoor work by Miller, the Molson Aqua Sculpture, will be permanently installed this summer at Harbourfront as our gift to the people of Toronto on the occasion of Molson's 200th anniversary.

Norman M. Seagram
President
Molson Ontario Breweries Limited

Introduction and Acknowledgements

The Bernie Miller exhibition is the Art Gallery of Ontario's way of celebrating an important new public art commission at Harbourfront. *Learn to Throw Your Voice! (Trumpet, Wall, Drive-Unit)*, the winner of the Molson Aqua Sculpture competition, will be unveiled at Harbourfront during the exhibition. The exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario documents this sculpture, amplifies its themes and sets its context in a typology of forms revealed in Miller's four most recent works made and exhibited in 1984 and 1985.

Learn to throw Your Voice! is the result of a competition organized by Harbourfront for the Molson commission. In the Fall of 1985 a selection committee asked eight Canadian artists and architectural firms to submit models and proposals, and in December 1985 a jury selected Bernie Miller's work to be installed at Harbourfront.

This is an exhibition that literally would not have taken place without its sponsors, Molson Breweries. I owe thanks especially to Norman Seagram, President, and Kathleen Maunder, Coordinator, Bicentennial Celebrations, Molson Ontario Breweries Limited, for their support of this project. As recipient of the Molson Aqua Sculpture and organizer of the competition, Harbourfront had an impetus in sparking the idea of this exhibition. I worked closely with William Boyle, Director of The Art Gallery at Harbourfront, and Jeanne Parkin, Coordinator of the Molson Aqua Sculpture Competition.

At the Art Gallery of Ontario, the staff worked hard accommodating the late scheduling of this exhibition. Among these were Faye Van Horne, Assistant Coordinator of Photographic Services, and Carlo Catenazzi, Head Photographer; Alan Terakawa, Acting Head, Promotion, and Catherine Van Baren, Editor; Bernie Oldcorn, Manager of Technical Services, John Ruseckas, Chief Preparator, and their staff. Robert Stacey edited the catalogue, and Bruce Mau initiated a new design for the Art Gallery of Ontario's Contemporary Canadian catalogues. And of course, Bernie Miller has contributed willingly to all aspects of the exhibition. Above all, my thanks to my secretary Cheryl Izen and especially to Barbara Fischer, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art and co-curator of this exhibition, for their unflagging contributions in helping to commence a new exhibition program.

Philip Monk
Curator, Contemporary Canadian Art

Bernie Miller

Much of Toronto sculptor Bernie Miller's work combines forms and motifs that are known to us in various ways, whether they are found industrial materials or references to past engineering or art that used the machine as a symbol of a utopian future. Whether that future was communist or capitalist, art often expressed society's hopes through technology represented by the machine in art. And it is the art and forms of Soviet Constructivism and Productivism, epitomized by such artists as Gustav Klutskis, Vladimir Tatlin and El Lissitzky, which synthesized the industrial and political revolutions in the look and function of their art, that seem called forth here. At the end of the twentieth century, however, these motifs are politically and industrially outmoded: they now exist only as images. They can be called upon as elements of a working vocabulary, reordered in a commentary on their past, so that the iconic resemblance reverberates in a new meaning. They can be manipulated in the same way as the standard hardware, such as the television antenna tower in *Tableau with Beast and Pillars* (no. 2), and put together in representational images as if they were words in a sentence, and hence the components of a "language" that is commonly known.

Miller's work makes reference to a historical period even beyond the art motifs he draws upon. The images and materials have their origin in a period of industry contemporary with Constructivism/Productivism: the material and energy of steel and electric power, the images of radio and the cinema. This cluster of images, materials and references equates the motivating forces of industry and information, or, more strongly stated, propaganda. The theme of the identity of the techniques of the information or culture industry and those of the machine age is established.

In sculpture that "comments" on ideologically motivated monuments, Miller does not just present a motif that we can trace back to other monuments. He presents a counter-activity as a value; the *bricoleur* approach, the put-together, do-it-yourself technology is a commentary on the monuments he refers to by the "profiles" he employs in his sculptures: ideal representations of the meshing of the human in a technological order. His is not the only subversive technique; the monuments undermine themselves through an ambiguity that plays havoc with the moral imperative implied, for instance, in *In a State's* futuristic thrust of its cantilevered support and its raised megaphone as the Revolution makes a revolution into its opposite (no. 1). A process, not a commentary, is offered here; and just as the machine in Miller's

art is not instrumental, the work is left open to the possibility of different investments by the viewer. The work, then, presents an ambiguity; its “function” is this irresolution left open for the viewer to consider.

The works occupy a complex temporal moment: their images recall a historical period that looked to the future. These images – the past’s image of the future made in the past’s technological present – now function as signs of that sometimes failed hope, in whatever political terms we wish to measure it. They are, then, as much emblems of the dialectic of hope and failure as they are of the past and future. Miller’s machines are “symbols” or rather signs of something that has passed into an image, or into an image-repertoire that society maintains, images that carry a host of associations. These “machines” are no longer functional, at most they are dysfunctional: the motor of *In a State* spins madly and yet the megaphone makes a barely visible rotation. In this sense, Miller’s work is an archive of the Industrial Revolution, recording the ruins of the forms of industry as society passes from industrialism to post-industrialism, from a dominant form of production to that of consumption. But it is also a response to a changed cultural logic, where every object is part of a signifying system, a system of interchangeable meaning that exists in and through the image. In this exchange, the work is more than an archive, a memorial to destitute things and failed hopes. It is the motivation of the image, a monument meant to move us, that is in question in Miller’s work. Today, in the changed conditions of our culture, that monument could as well be television.

Most of Miller’s machine-sculptures combine the motivating forces of the material and the ideological put together in the shape of a monument. But they use the objects of the past to comment on the techniques of today. Miller’s work presents the situation of the highest techniques – that of media – in terms of old technology in the reverse of Marshall McLuhan’s theory that old technologies become the content of new forms of technology. He can continue to explore this issue through his own practice as a sculptor. After all, for centuries, outside of architecture, the monument was taken as the ideal cultural representation of a society.

In a State

(no. 1)

As we come to expect from monuments put to different uses, the sculpture *In a State* (1984) is both an object and a sign, a body and a graphic image. With its “arm” raised, it bespeaks a ceaseless aspiration onwards and evokes the dynamism and idealism of constructivist art: an optimism about the future firmly rooted in collective action allied to the technological inventions and industrial processes of a new age. Here art is agit-prop; it potentially transforms thought into action, mental processes and

labour into social and scientific progress, both of which are indissolubly linked to a revolutionary way of life.

In a State is not merely an iconic sign; it is also a machine. At the heart of the work is a motor which drives the perpetual tantrum of a whirling shaft. The shaft's turning is translated via rubber belts into a series of pulley-wheels. As the wheels increase in size, setting up a hierarchical order, the "libidinal" work of the motor and shaft (the rubber rings linking the motor to the shaft coincidentally are called "Lovejoy") is almost completely swallowed after the second relay. This virtual disappearance of spectacular motion instantly captures our curiosity. Only after a certain amount of time has lapsed do we realize that the arm, with its attached megaphone, has slowly moved counter-clockwise.

The action of the motor of *In a State* is not distributed as much as it is curbed and administered by a hierarchical structure. If one reads this over the Soviet Constructivist ethos, which was dedicated to the rationalization of human life through organized industrialization, the art object here may be interpreted in retrospect as a sign of a totalitarian, rather than a liberating, impulse. By transforming energy into motion and administering motion to yield the continuation of a political state, *In a State* perhaps represents the result of achieving total order through an oppressive bureaucracy. The revolutionary impulses of this art would then become purely instrumental, serving a role in propagandistic subjection.

This reading, however, suggests that the sculpture is merely a demonstration of an oppressive state of affairs. It disregards that this object has more than one "state." As the arm moves upward, the dynamics of the sign herald the revolutionary impulse amplified by the megaphone at the top. But after the "stately" spectacle with arms, hopes and flags rising, a slow collapse inevitably follows. This anticlimactic motion dismantles the sign's heroic, optimistic drive. In an astonishing reversal, the machine becomes humble, much more body-like. A disarming movement begins in which the megaphone resembles a cup, a hand, the extension of a broken arm in an absolutely pathetic pose. This state of defeat could be said to be a setback but also a contradiction: the other side of the coin of the progressive language and vision of Constructivism. On the basis of this observation we may now want to proclaim the failure or the death of the revolution.

These different readings suggest that the energy transformed along the object's spine to the arm also "moves" us, by making the arm signify different emotional or psychological states. This more complex interpretation implicates and thus disarms us. The mechanisms at work in *In a State* are not merely objective, external forces; rather, they describe internal "relays," "drives," and "energies" which motivate investments and which link private and public, individual and society, subject and object. Given our attraction to this type of monument and what it represents, the question remains whether the desire and hope for social and scientific progress

will inevitably embrace an authoritarian regime. Without dispensing readymade answers, Bernie Miller's work relays the full weight of this question onto the viewer where hope retains its dynamic.

Tableau with Beast and Pillars

(no. 2)

The three "characters" of *Tableau with Beast and Pillars* (1984) resemble transmitting and receiving devices. The "beast," for example, a looming, four-legged creature with a metal head, looks like a loudspeaker or television. The tall tower, on the top of which a cone surveys the surrounding space, is actually made from a television antenna. The box-like object of heavy steel plates, flame-cut like a sewer grate, has the appearance of a screen or filter. As much as these objects depict modern functions, they are oddly archaic, if we take them at their names and compare "beast" and "pillars" to "satellite dish" and "antenna," for example. "Beast" and "pillar" seem to refer to outmoded motifs, archetypal figures of a mythic or classical social order that has fallen into ruin. They are evoked as names or signs: for what has taken their place and what now possesses their bodies may still function as the order of society but in the radically altered terms of a systems society or television culture.

The tableau unfolds as an imaginary cityscape. Its seemingly irrational space and the disjunction of scale lend the work a surreal or De Chirico-like quality. These result in a certain oscillation of possible views, an expansion and contraction of the *mis-en-scène*, where either a small, entertaining and absurd event is taking place, or a world of monstrous dimensions threatens.

With the personification of archaic types in a scene without human beings, we could interpret the tableau as a negative utopian vision, the image of a totalized environment. It depicts the situation of a private domain that has ceased to exist and a *polis* that functions without a leader. In a world of specialized communications technologies no-one seems in charge, no-one designs or designates the messages. The "beast" is dominant, constantly consuming and aggressively projecting no particular message. The television antenna with revolving cone seems to occupy a privileged position, the symbol of that absent power. Fixed on that which cannot yet be seen, it mediates between above and below, past and future, material and immaterial. Yet, at the same time, it is only an instrument of surveillance: it circles emptily, revolving eternally, picking up everything, and letting everything pass through without judgement or discrimination. Perhaps it transmits something to the "beast," which in turn distributes it to the other pillar – the imploded version of a house. With its repetitious rows of holes suggestive of windows of apartment buildings or highrise office towers, the building no longer protects: it is custodial and at the same

time a filter that passes the flows produced by communications technology. This circular collapse of production and consumption, consumer and consumed into each other transforms culture into the image and medium of technology itself.

Radio Theory

(no. 3)

The fragmented appearance of *Radio Theory* (1985) lends this work an expressionistic intensity unlike that of other works by Bernie Miller. This may be a result of the appearance of the human figure, which is here used by Miller for the first time. If the anthropomorphic element was registered through the simulation of machine technology in *In a State*, the figure in *Radio Theory* is rendered within a return to a past style in art. At the same time, though, this representation is materialized in a mechanical form: the sections of the disjointed figure are made of the same sheets of galvanized steel as are used in the manufacture of air vents.

The breakdown into elementary geometric forms and the vector of the figure's running motion allies this work to early twentieth-century cubo-futurist renderings; Fernand Léger's mechanomorphic paintings are good examples. But whereas in these early paintings the figure was constructed from several points of view and moments in time to yield an integrated two-dimensional plane, here the figure disperses from a centre. Or rather it is exploded in a force field that projects from the object in front of it, which is in part the representation of a microphone. That is, the figure is fragmented as an extension of a larger medium: radio.

In *Radio Theory*, some of the optimism of the early century is dispersed. Instead of being liberated by the advances of technology, the figure is subsumed within a technical realm. It is articulated mechanically, thus playing a function within an industrial order. The work's Machine-Age optimism is belied by the robotic nature of the figure. At the same time, another order is represented here in which the individual as a living organism becomes a mere receptacle for the flows which have been set into motion by the media, a more subtle mechanization. The individual is as much enmeshed within this system as in a simpler mechanical order and the fragmentation of the self is much more complex. If in *Tableau with Beast and Pillars* the external environment was represented as having been completely transformed into the "landscape" of communications technology, here it is subject-hood that is at stake in the fragmentation and commodification of experience.

The body of the figure and the instrument of the radio serve each other. The head of the figure is dislocated and functions now as the "head" of a microphone as well. As this lies fallen on the ground, it produces the same pathos as the fallen arm of *In a State*. The figure here has become a duct for the inexhaustible flow and

the continuous consumption of information. We are captured in this flow, unable to escape the mechanisms of control that produce and move through it. And as it is unlikely that this circulation can be halted, but only interrupted, how do we escape the danger of being a mere function of the media, reproduced in their image? We would have to admit that we already are; but to stop transmitting or receiving this image or flow, we would have to deny or foreclose the pleasure in producing and interrupting the flow. In our own lives its parallel is desiring and speaking, wanting to know and wanting to tell.

Future Use

(no. 4)

Future Use (1985) seems like a miniature model of one of Hollywood's large motion-picture studio lots where one can linger among fantastic façades lining the streets of phantom cities. But *Future Use* is more than a simulation; this work articulates with particular poignancy the processes of reproduction and representation, in which the movie industry plays only the most obvious, the most visible part. While the viewer is implicated in these processes on levels more complex and closer to home than in earlier works, this work insists more emphatically on alternatives for action and, at the same time, indicates a possible course.

All is not initially present to view in this work. A large wall resembling an ancient temple or a medieval fortress restricts our line of vision and that impediment exaggerates the wall's material presence. It signals authority, secrecy and privileged access. This effect is emphasized even more by the large welded stage light that projects a steel "beam" parallel to the wall to serve as a logo or three-dimensional monument for that which the wall so sternly protects. The two seem to sum up perfectly the simulacrum that is the movie industry.

From behind the wall an actual light, a violet haze, which seems both chemically produced and television-like, leaks into our space. It is a lure: something is going on "behind the scenes," producing the scene. Yet what we discover behind the wall does not approximate the spectacle we may have expected, and in fact stands in stark contrast to what was announced by the beam in front. We find a small home-movie studio behind the wall, which is now revealed to be counterfeit: sheets of styrofoam painted with a thin coat of concrete are attached to a flimsy metal scaffold. The violet light that poured around the wall is only a fluorescent tube propped up between a stack of found objects and a Super-8 projector which throws an image of a city onto a portable screen. This series of anticlimactic discoveries continues as we find that the projected image, in contrast to the high drama the steel beam advertised, is in fact the shadow of a heap of objects – a slide tray, a hamper cage, and

several old radios – which serve as homemade props. The movie studio is merely the metaphor for the reproduction in the domestic realm of the desires produced by movies.

Our movement around the wall reenacts a process of reproduction and socialization of the individual through cinema. This reproduction was implied in Miller's earlier work by the function of the monument. Now the stage light in front of the wall similarly directs our gaze to an imaginary future. It is a symbol of hope, too; it seems to shout "Imagine Tomorrow!" or "Imagine the Future – It's all Yours!" Since it projects no image, it is a sign for desire itself, so that any image it directs its gaze upon may become a temporary object of desire. Movies and advertising implicate us in this logic of consumption, as the self-projected image of the home-movie studio seems to prove.

At the same time, however, that this setup seems to reproduce an image of society as defined by Hollywood or the media, and that the homemade apparatus projecting the cityscape merely seems to imitate the more spectacular effects of movies, it also shows them up as props and yet revels in them. This studio, with its handyman, *bricoleur* aesthetic, is the domain of the subject. The means of making representations can be seized; they are accessible. The redundant objects of culture can easily initiate a break-up and rearrangement of an existing order. Bernie Miller's work has initiated one such intervention. By playing out the terms of the contemporary production of desire, the work gives us a means of examining the workings of desire, hope and aspiration: how they are put to use, how they drive the spectacular glitter of images and the dream of reaching the stars, and how the private, subjective world is linked to the larger cultural arena. *Future Use* is that play through which a continual re-examination of these processes takes place.

Learn to Throw Your Voice! (Trumpet, Wall, Drive-Unit)

(figs. 1-4)

Learn to Throw Your Voice! (Trumpet, Wall, Drive-Unit) (1986), the Molson Aqua Sculpture Competition winner, is located on a site that is in a process of transformation. What was once an industrial zone bounded by a harbour and railway tracks has rapidly become a residential and recreation area. The primary mode of activity has passed from production and distribution to service and entertainment – that is, from a general orientation to production to one of consumption. All traces of the origins of the site in the unique architectural forms of industry – warehouses, water towers, storage elevators – are quickly disappearing. They will only be remembered or memorialized in a sculpture commission.

Now that *Learn to Throw Your Voice!*, unlike Miller's other work in the exhibition, is no longer just a representation and commentary on monuments which have their place in the gallery, it has to take on the conditions of a monument itself. At Toronto's Harbourfront, it finds a public address. That "address" is a site *and* a mode of speech.

In a 1979 *October* essay entitled "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Rosalind Krauss stated, "The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolic tongue about the meaning or use of that place." But she traces the development of modern sculpture as a crossing of the "threshold of the logic of sculpture, entering the space of what could be called its negative condition – a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place. Which is to say one enters modernism, since it is the modernist period of sculptural production that operates in relation to this loss of site, producing the monument as abstraction, the monument as pure marker or base, functionally placeless and largely self-referential."

In relocating a site for sculpture as a public monument, *Learn to Throw Your Voice!* must confront and redress the "negative conditions" of sculpture's homelessness. At Harbourfront, it functions to reassert a site that has been lost: it is the site that is homeless. At the same time, it cannot reproduce the traditional logic of the monument. It must be a monument for the public and thus operate on a representational level; but it must defeat the monument as an ideal representation that maintains the spectator as a passive observer.

Learn to Throw Your Voice! takes some of its forms from previous Miller sculptures, but now it allies those forms, with their references to art and history, to the site of the piece at Harbourfront. The cantilevering towers of early Soviet art now also find their reference in lifeguard or water towers, the megaphone speaker in foghorns. The concrete wall takes on multiple associations: to a lighthouse with a beacon, for instance, or a Great Lakes storage elevator like the one that stood on the spot. The reference of the wall changes from different points of view and with different views the wall changes its scale: seen from above it also becomes a cistern, which with its lid pulled back, is the source of the water that flows down the steps and the side of the wall to the "pond" at its foot.

The "drive-unit," with its propeller and megaphone, continues the reference to water and machinery. The shaft can be moved by hand. The other element, the giant megaphone, calls upon another theme constant to Miller's work. The mouth of the megaphone is at a speaker's height. And here the command of the title, "learn to throw your voice," takes on a double effect. Not only does it call upon one to act, it plays upon the notion of ventriloquism, which has actual effect in the technology implied in the radio or public-address-type speaker of the tower.

Whereas *Future Use* presented a dialogue between a public and private production of desire, *Learn to Throw Your Voice!* acts fully on the side of the public in that the work does not just present a situation, but allows the spectator to enact it. It magnifies the individual act through the megaphone, an amplification equivalent in power to the disenfranchising technology of the tower. The viewer is active, not passive, in reception. *Learn to Throw Your Voice!* is not merely an image of public art, it appropriates the site's industrial forms as a public realm. It expropriates them in a memorial that actively remains public.

Finally, the "trumpet" of the tower can also be associated with the wall as a "Jericho effect." The utopian vision implied in the wall's reference to the International Style – which owes something to Le Corbusier's love of Canadian grain storage elevators – ironically has left much in ruin. In a sense, then, *Learn to Throw Your Voice!* is a monument to what has been replaced in the name of progress, while at the same time it addresses those modernist impulses. That "Jericho effect" has to be returned to the public or individual through the device of the megaphone. As in Miller's other work, it is the responsibility of the individual to confront the monument, to make it tumble down if necessary. As Bernie Miller says of this sculpture, "the references to location and history approach the ironies, circularities, and yet the necessity of a dynamic between general progress and individual aspiration."



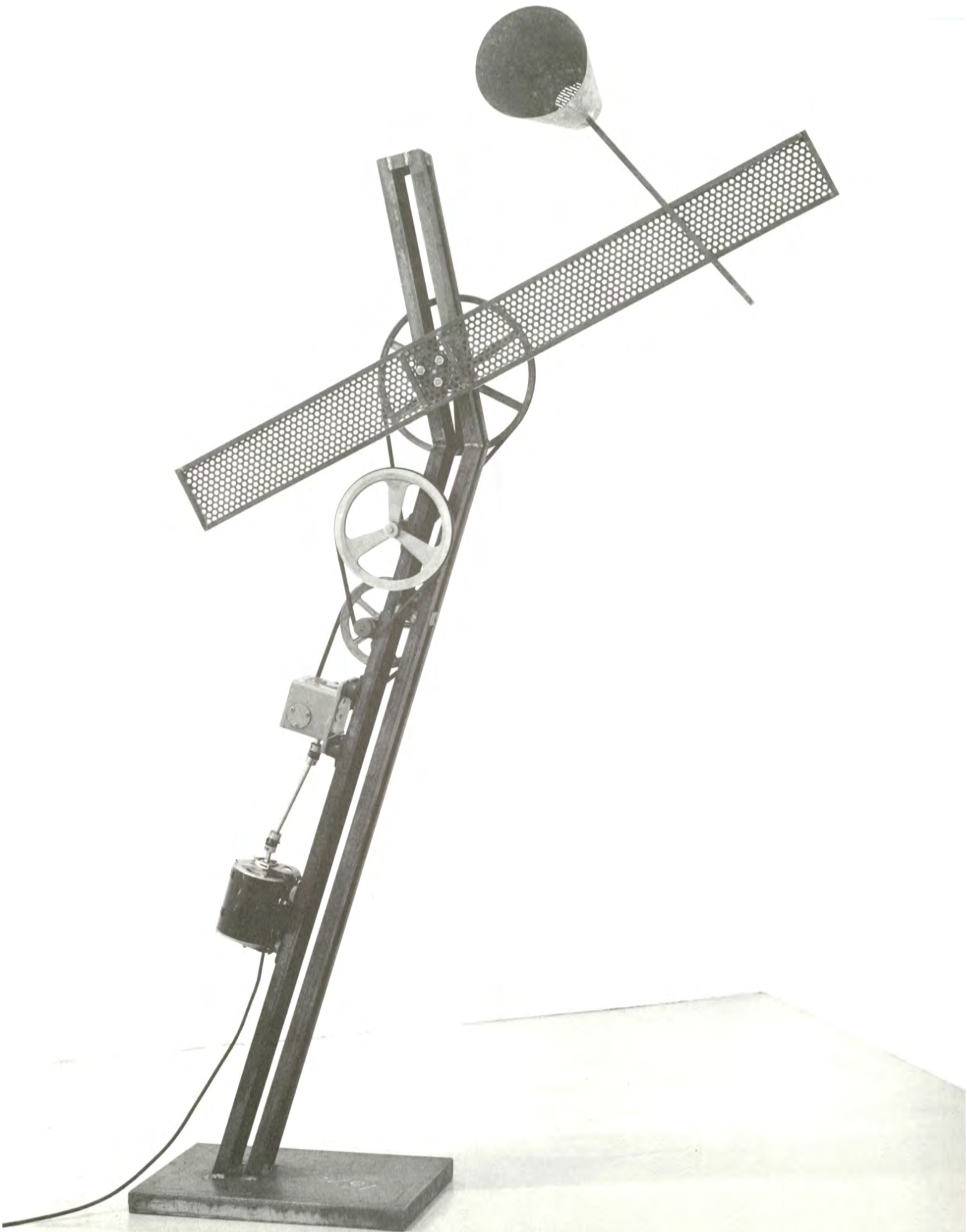
No. 1

In a State 1984

Steel, sheet metal, power transmission components

274.3 cm x 152.4 cm x 38.1 cm

Collection of the artist





No. 2

Tableau with Beast and Pillars 1984

Steel, sheet metal, power transmission components

303.0 cm x 366.0 cm x 213.3 cm

Collection of the artist



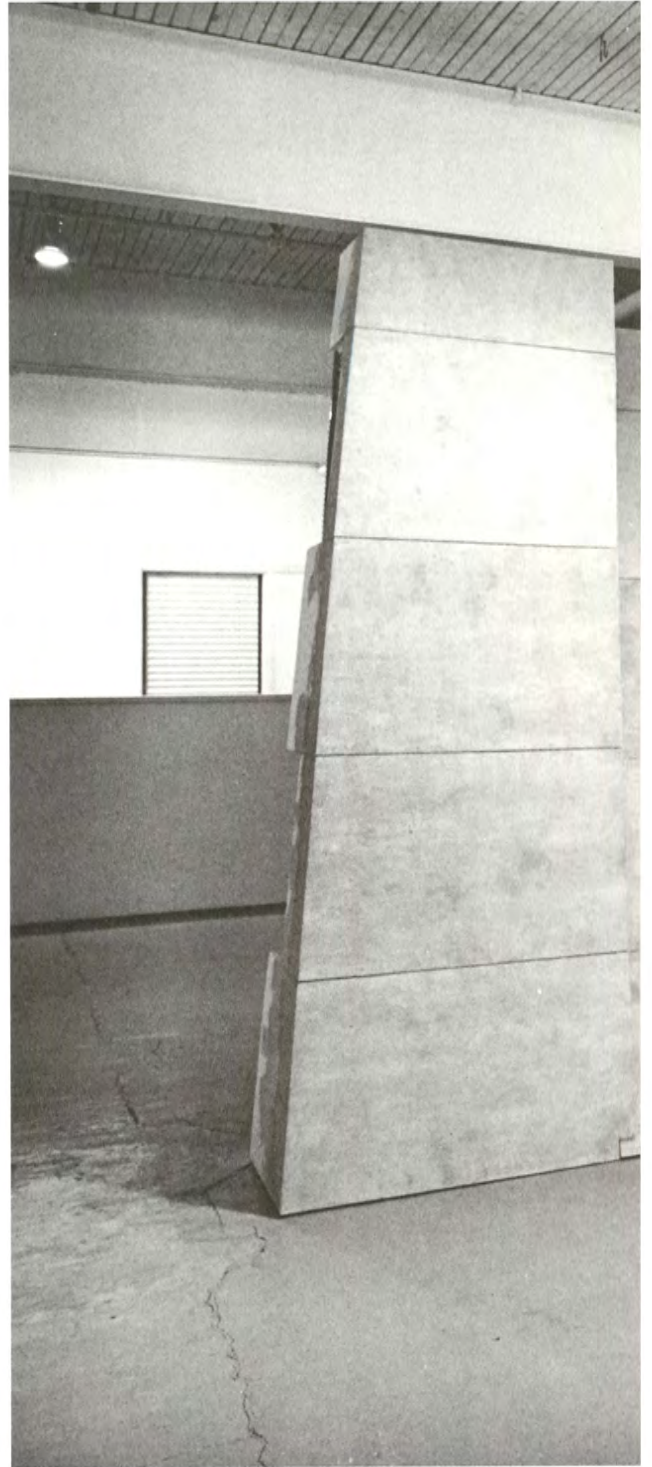
No. 3

Radio Theory 1985

Steel, sheet metal, glass

335.2 cm x 497.0 cm x 346.0 cm

Collection of the artist



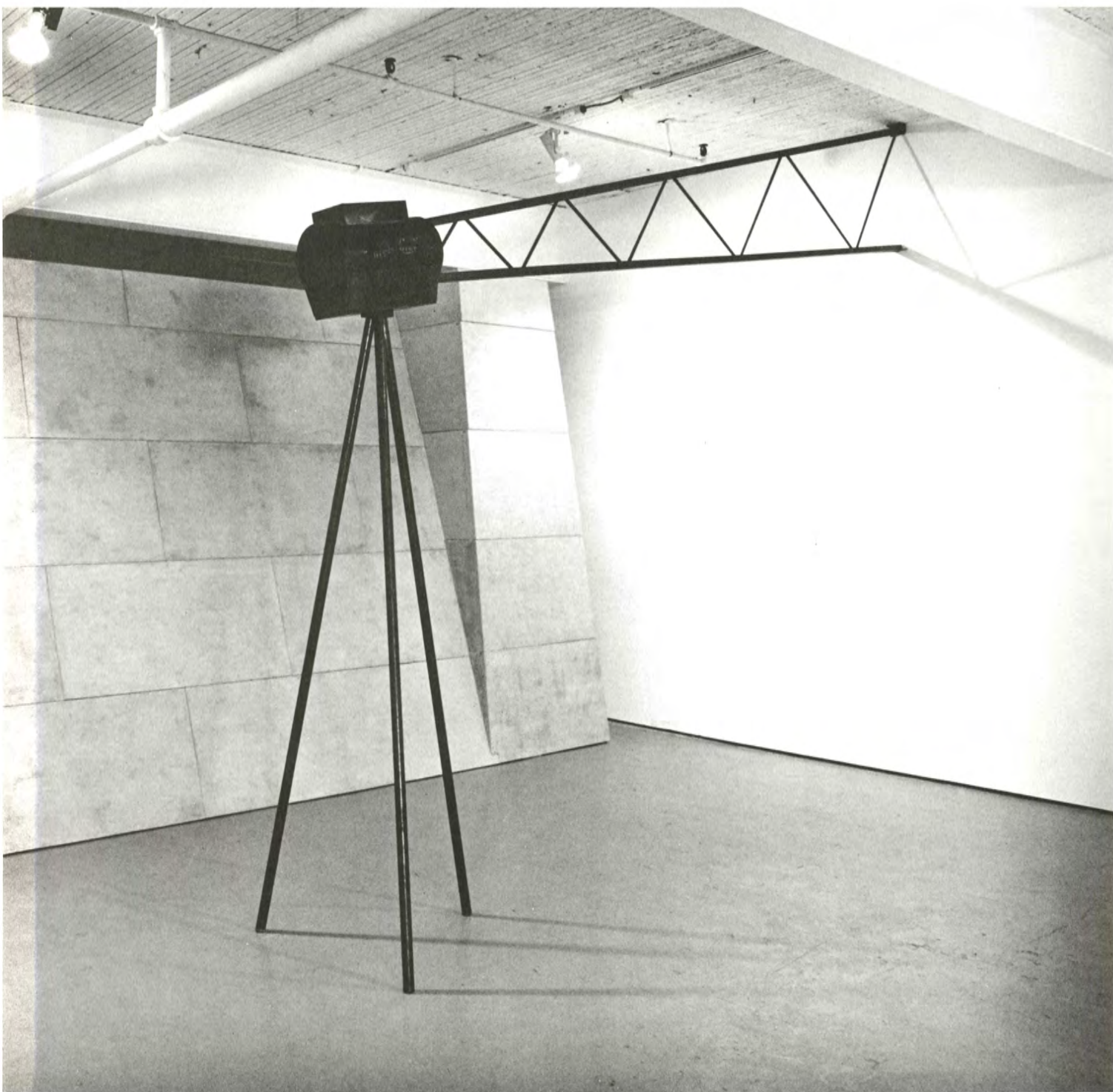
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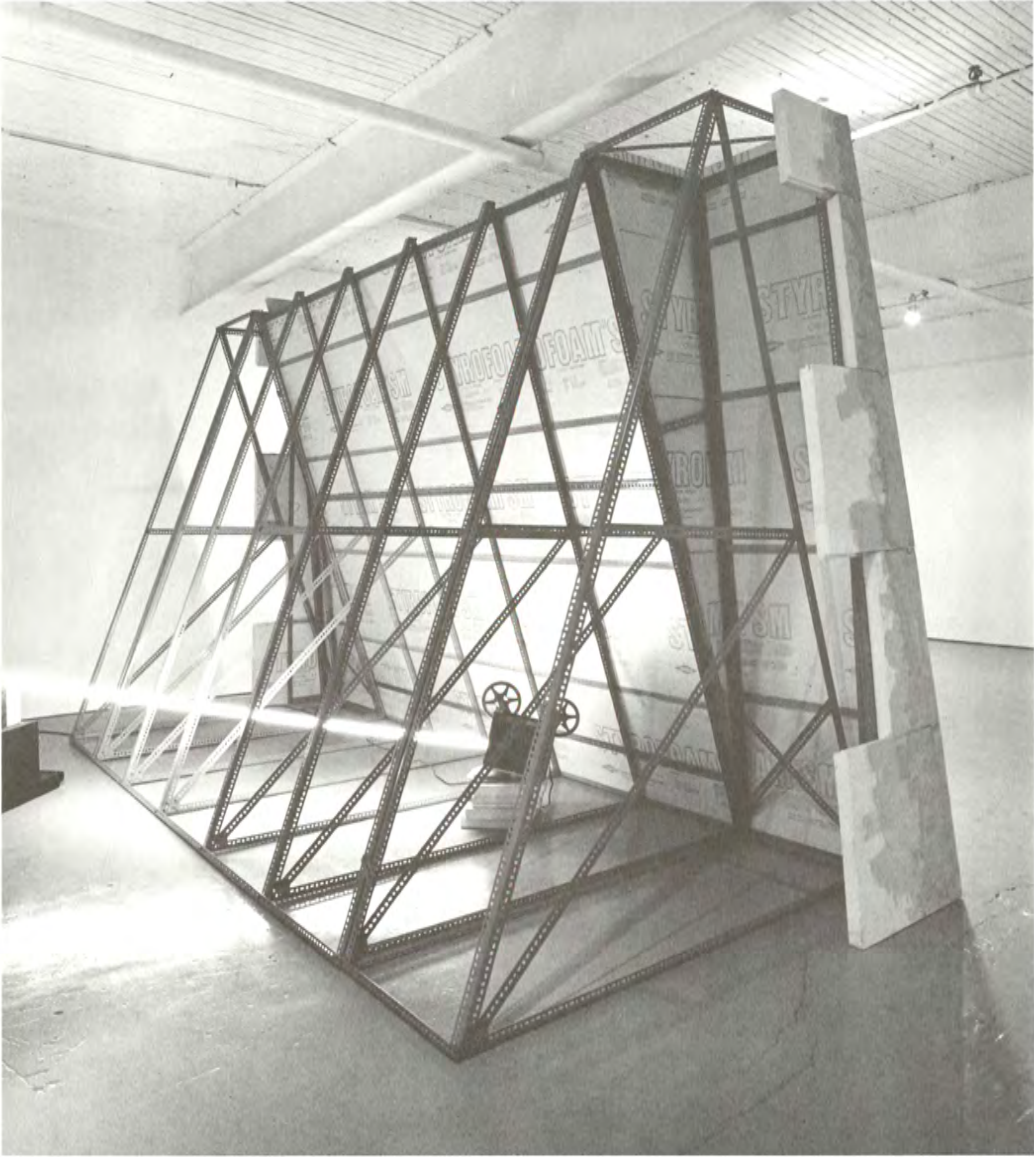
Future Use (detail) 1985

Steel, styrofoam, light fixtures, various found objects

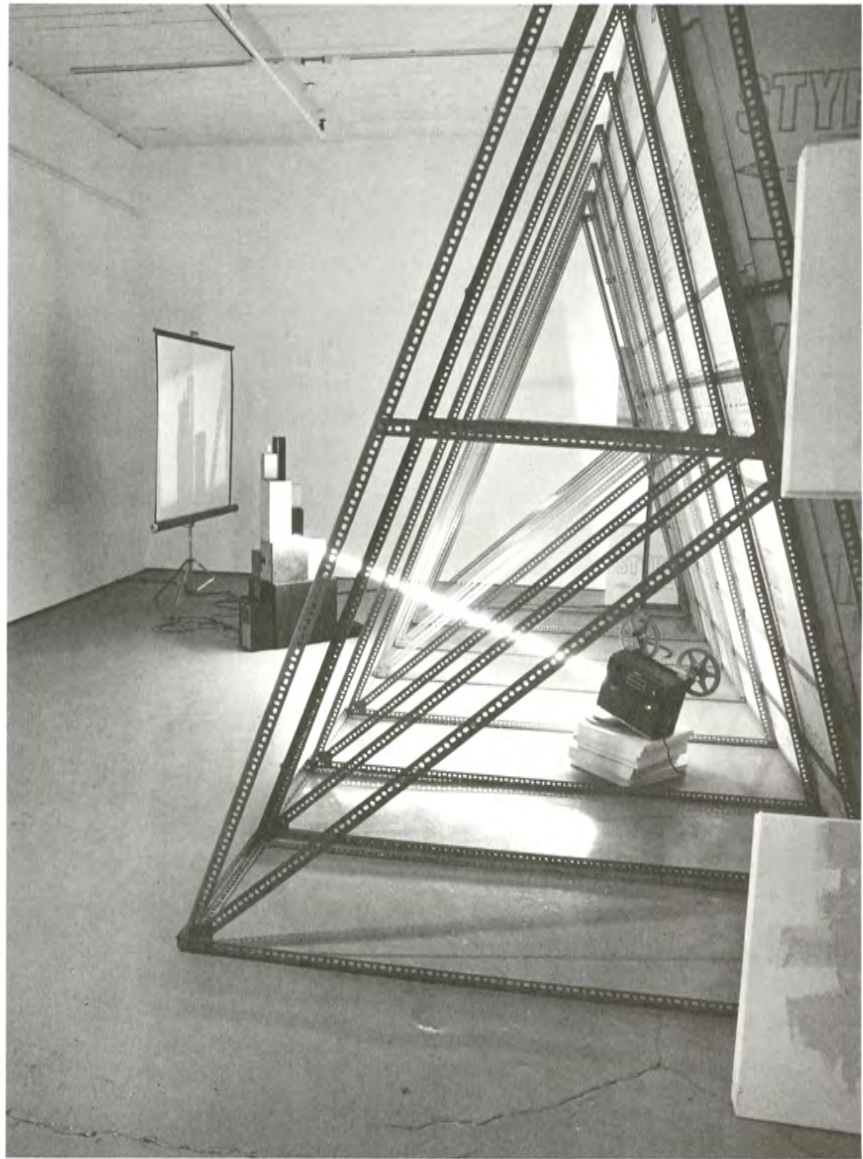
260.0 (variable) x 488.0 cm x 366.0 cm

Collection of the artist





No. 4
Future Use (detail)



No. 4
Future Use (detail)

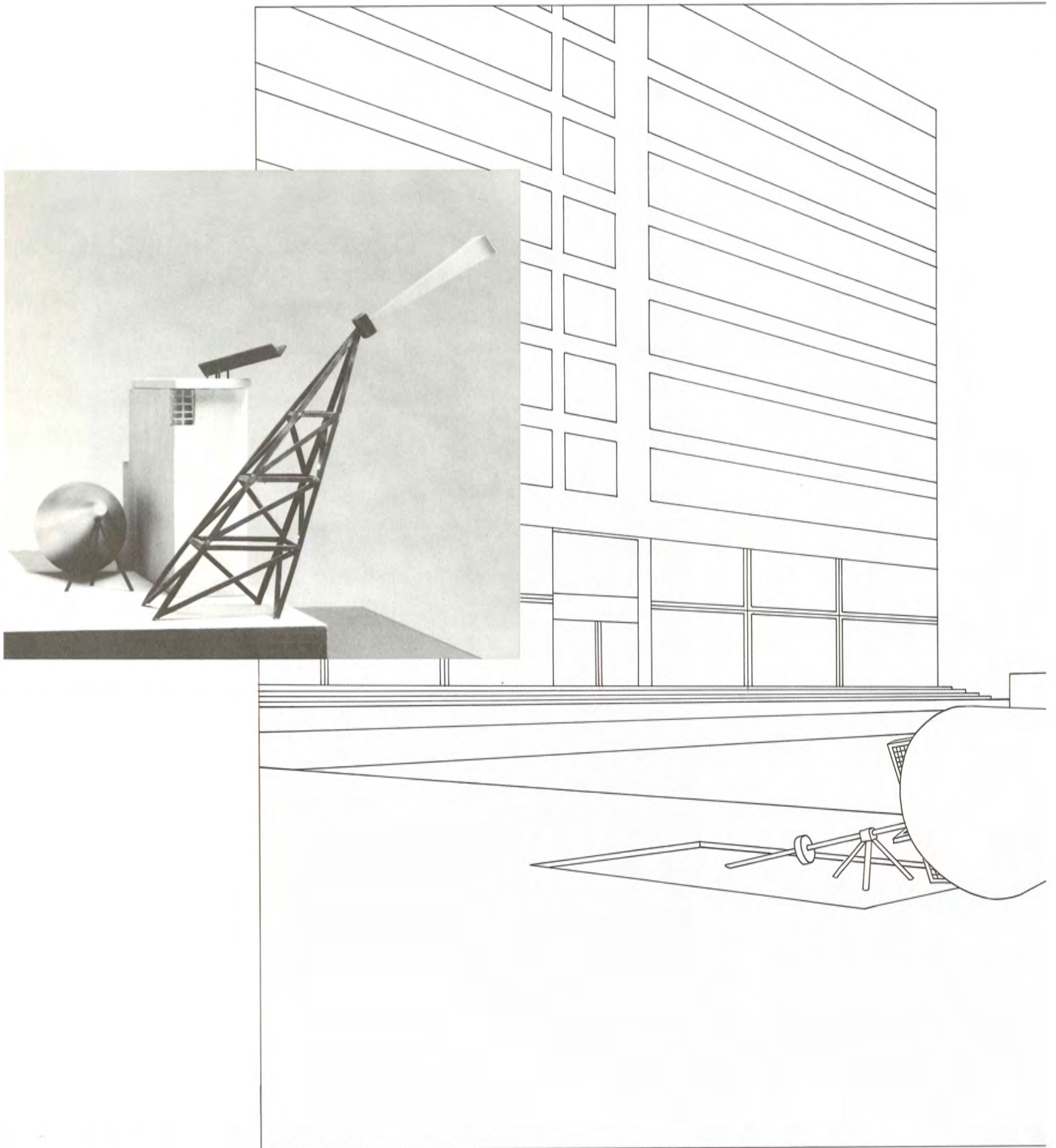


Fig. 1
Learn to Throw Your Voice! (Trumpet, Wall, Drive-Unit) 1985
(Proposal for the Molson's Aqua Sculpture Competition)
Wood, metals, plexiglas, paint
Model made by David Didur from Standing Metal Works
32.3 x 51.6 x 59.0 cm
Collection of the artist

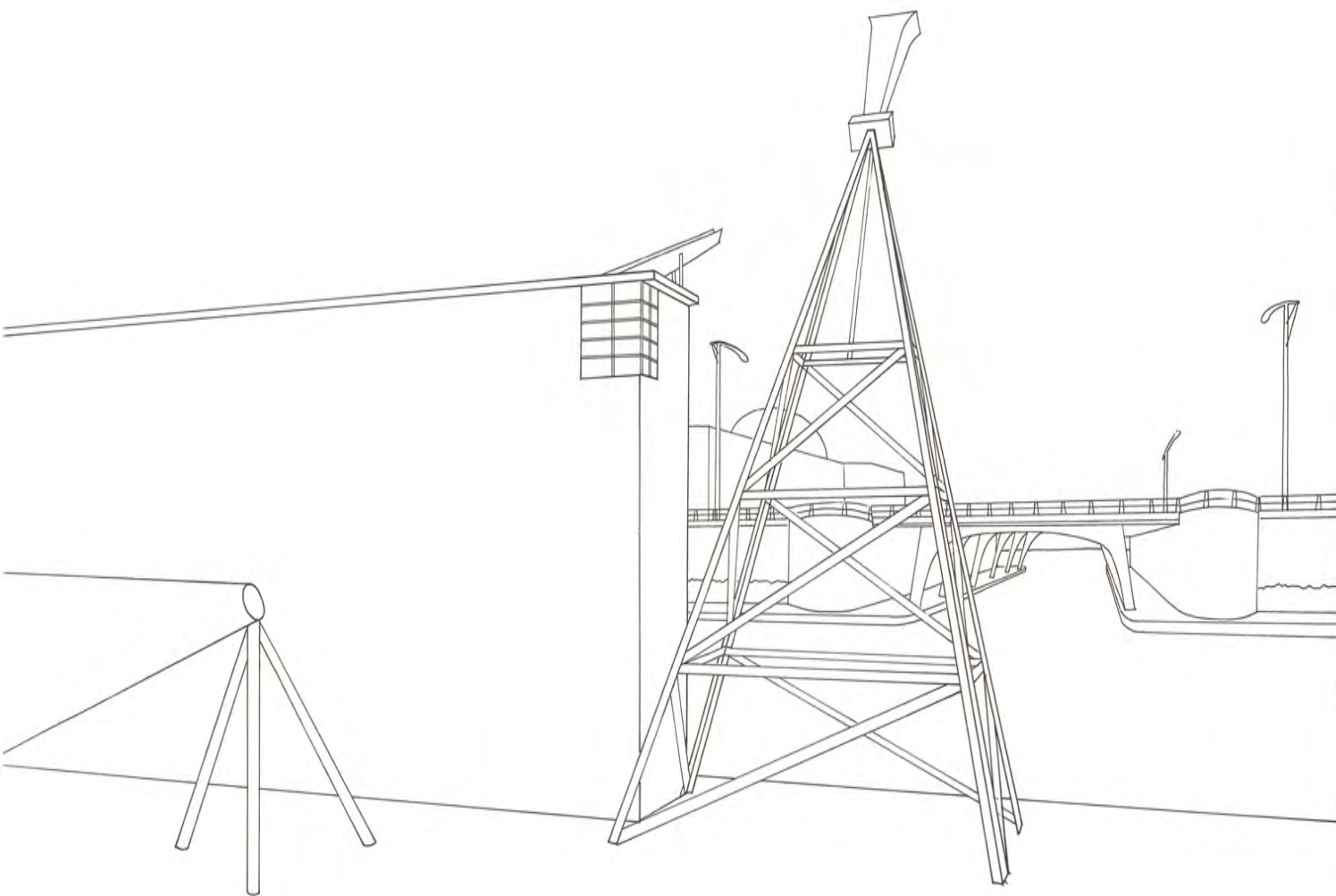


Fig. 2

Untitled (drawing for *Learn to Throw Your Voice!*)

(Proposal for the Molson's Aqua Sculpture Competition)

Ink on vellum

Rendering by Peter Greyson

61.0 x 91.4 cm

Collection of the artist

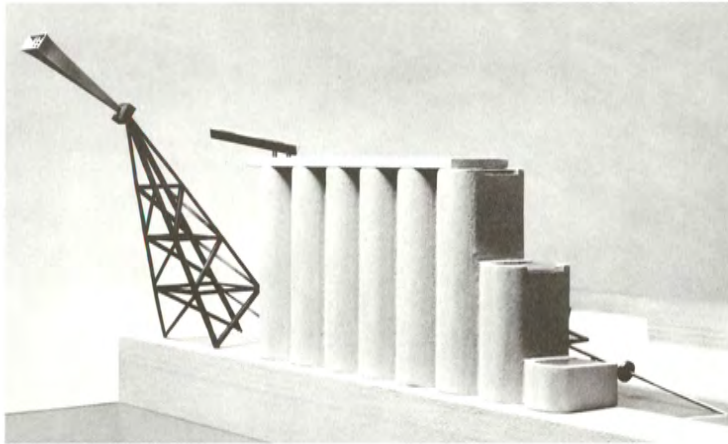


Fig. 3
Learn to Throw Your Voice!

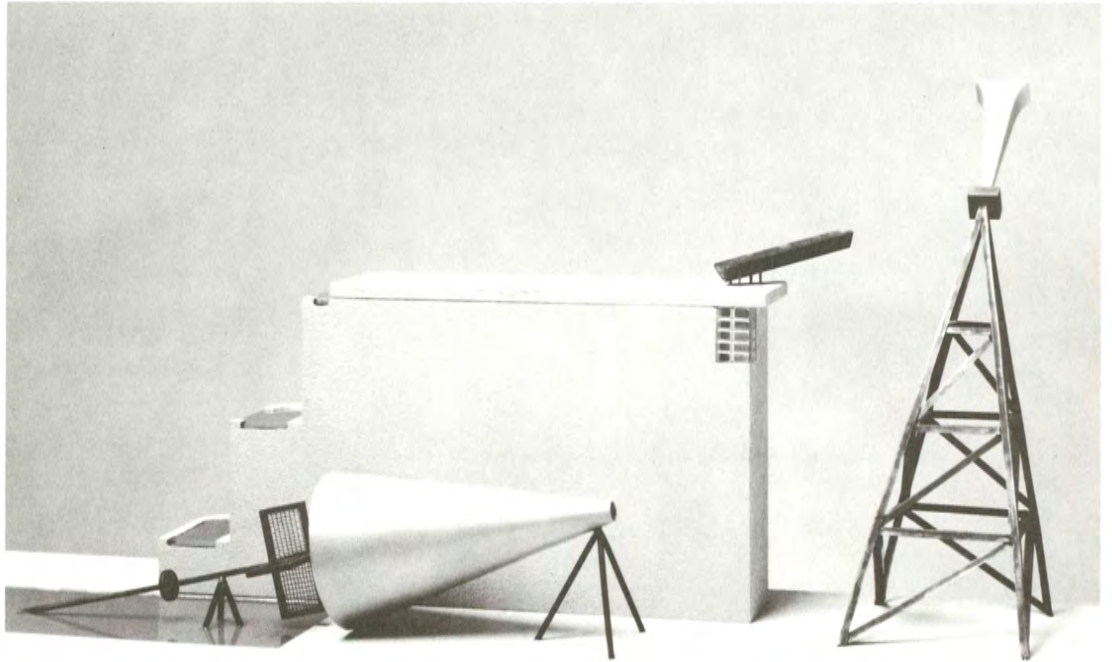


Fig. 4
Learn to Throw Your Voice!

Chronology

Bernie Miller

Born

1948 Toronto, Ontario

Studied

1974 Graduated from Ontario College of Art, Toronto

Solo Exhibitions

1977 Galerie Scollard, Toronto

1980 Mercer Union, Front Gallery, Toronto

1982 Glendon Gallery, Toronto

Art Gallery of Brant, Brantford, Ontario

1985 Eye Level Gallery, Halifax

Mercer Union, Toronto

Group Exhibitions

1975 *Chairs*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

1978 *Artists-In-Residence Project*, Galerie Scollard,
International Sculpture Symposium, Toronto

1979 Factory 77 Gallery, Toronto

1981 Factory 77 Gallery, Toronto

The Beauty of Machines, Cambridge Art Centre,
Cambridge, Ontario

1982 *Monumenta*, YYY, Toronto

1983 *Chromaliving*, Harridge's Department Store,
Colonnade Building, Toronto

1984 *Influencing Machines*, YYY, Toronto

The New City of Sculpture, organized by YYY and
Mercer Union, Toronto

1985 *Project: Colour Xerox*, Visual Arts Ontario, Toronto

Mercer Union Benefit Show, Mercer Union, Toronto

Urban Circuit, (N)On-Commercial Gallery,
Vancouver

1986 *Mapping the Surface*, Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon

Awards

Ontario College of Art Medal 1974

Ontario Arts Council Grant 1978, 1979,
1985, 1986

Ontario Arts Council Materials Assistance Grant
1980, 1982, 1985

Canada Council Short Term Grant 1981

Canada Council Project Cost Grant 1985

Canada Council "B" Grant 1983, 1984, 1986

Curating

1979 Board of Directors, YYY, Toronto
(to present)

1986 *Paradise Now and Then*, Toronto Sculpture
Garden

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