

FROM BERLIN NO1

CONSTANTINO CIERVO Project: Education/Breeding

January-February 2001 **JANOS GAT GALLERY**

CONSTANTINO CIERVO

Project: Education/Breeding

January 16 – February 17

2001

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Cover illustration: *Project: Education/Breeding* (cat p.5)

All measurements are in inches; height precedes width.

Essay by Darrow Schecter © 2000

Photographs: curtesy of Fine Art Rafael Vostell

Catalog design: MMG Graphics

Special thanks to: Rafael Vostell

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“Struck dumb and clinging together, things hide behind the architecture, which is completely neutral, and which later will grow into who knows what—maybe fascism, maybe nothing at all. What is the meaning of a ‘passage,’ of transit in a society, that is transition itself?”

—Siegfried Kracauer, *Streets in Berlin and Elsewhere* (1925-1933), p. 29

Costantino Ciervo has been living and working in West Berlin since 1984, where he has witnessed social and political history unfold in both dramatic terms and in very subtle, even microscopic ways. His work records both the epochal and microscopic changes that have accompanied the fall of the Berlin Wall in October 1989 and the transition from authoritarian state socialism in the former GDR to a very different socio-political formation shortly thereafter in the now united Federal Republic of Germany. The present works on exhibit take up and deepen a number of the themes connected with the unification period which are documented in Costantino’s works of 1992-96. His recent installations offer the opportunity to engage in a form of critical dialogue with contemporary German and European reality in ways reminiscent of Sigfried Kracauer’s articles in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* between 1925 and 1933. As the above quotation indicates, there is a way of reading signs inscribed in commodities as well as in architectural and other phenomena which offer visual keys of interpretation for understanding transition periods—a *passage*—in advanced industrial societies.

The transition unfolding before Kracauer’s eyes was the collapse of parliamentary democracy and the rise of National Socialism in Germany, which was accompanied most spectacularly by street scenes one tends to associate with devastating unemployment, wheelbarrows of virtually worthless cash, and brawls between communists, social democrats and fascists. His analysis of the transition from parliamentary institutions to a more overtly authoritarian political form of government largely ignores these more visible aspects of the Weimar socio-political landscape. He focuses instead on the changes in architecture, film, music, fashion, advertising, class structure, manner of speech, and even street lighting taking place at the same time, and shows how political authoritarianism is not simply born overnight. Instead, it grows and develops slowly in the relations between people and in the relations between people, objects and ideology. Kracauer suggests that these more subtle changes precede—and in important ways are indices of—more macro-level upheavals which may or may not occur, depending on the forces in play. Using a very different approach and different materials, Constantino Ciervo’s installations also offer viewers an

unexpected way of reading social landscapes. Common to both Kracauer’s and Ciervo’s approaches is to probe the surface of what are casually taken to be neutral or politically irrelevant products and locations: storefronts, film, fashion, etc., in Kracauer’s case, and construction sites, airports, technology, and genetic research with Ciervo.

One might cite Costantino Ciervo’s installations dealing with Potsdamer Platz as the key for understanding the continuity between his work in the mid-1990s and the present exhibition. It might be useful for those not familiar with his earlier installations or the recent history of Berlin to keep in mind that here too it is a question of documenting a particular passage or transition. Potsdamer Platz, once a flourishing intersection of communication, transportation and commerce before World War II, was destroyed in the War and left as a kind of “no man’s land” between the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic during the Cold War. With German re-unification in 1990, the place became symbolic of the new *Berliner Republik*. It evolved practically overnight from a desolate symbol of East-West tension, to a shrine to the trinity of technology, economic growth and progress. This is the same, ostensibly neutral trinity that was entrusted with the reconstruction of West Germany after 1945. To many politicians and journalists across Europe and North America, the new Potsdamer Platz can be seen as the final stage of that larger process of reconstruction. In the first step toward the new future, the destroyed cities of the Federal Republic were quickly adorned with modest “*Fussgängerzone*” (pedestrian zone) during the years of post-war “Economic Miracle”. Today, the arrival of that future is being celebrated at Potsdamer Platz with the most glorified “*Fussgängerzone*” imaginable: the names Sony and Daimler-Benz guarantee prestige, while McDonalds and mega-cinemas offer affordable prices for all citizens, regardless of which side of the Wall they grew up on. Yet Costantino Ciervo’s works of the mid-90s challenge the dominant interpretation of Potsdamer Platz as the final stage in the reconstruction of post-1945 Germany. The installations of that period suggest the passage to something new rather than an endpoint. A transition surely, but to what kind of society?

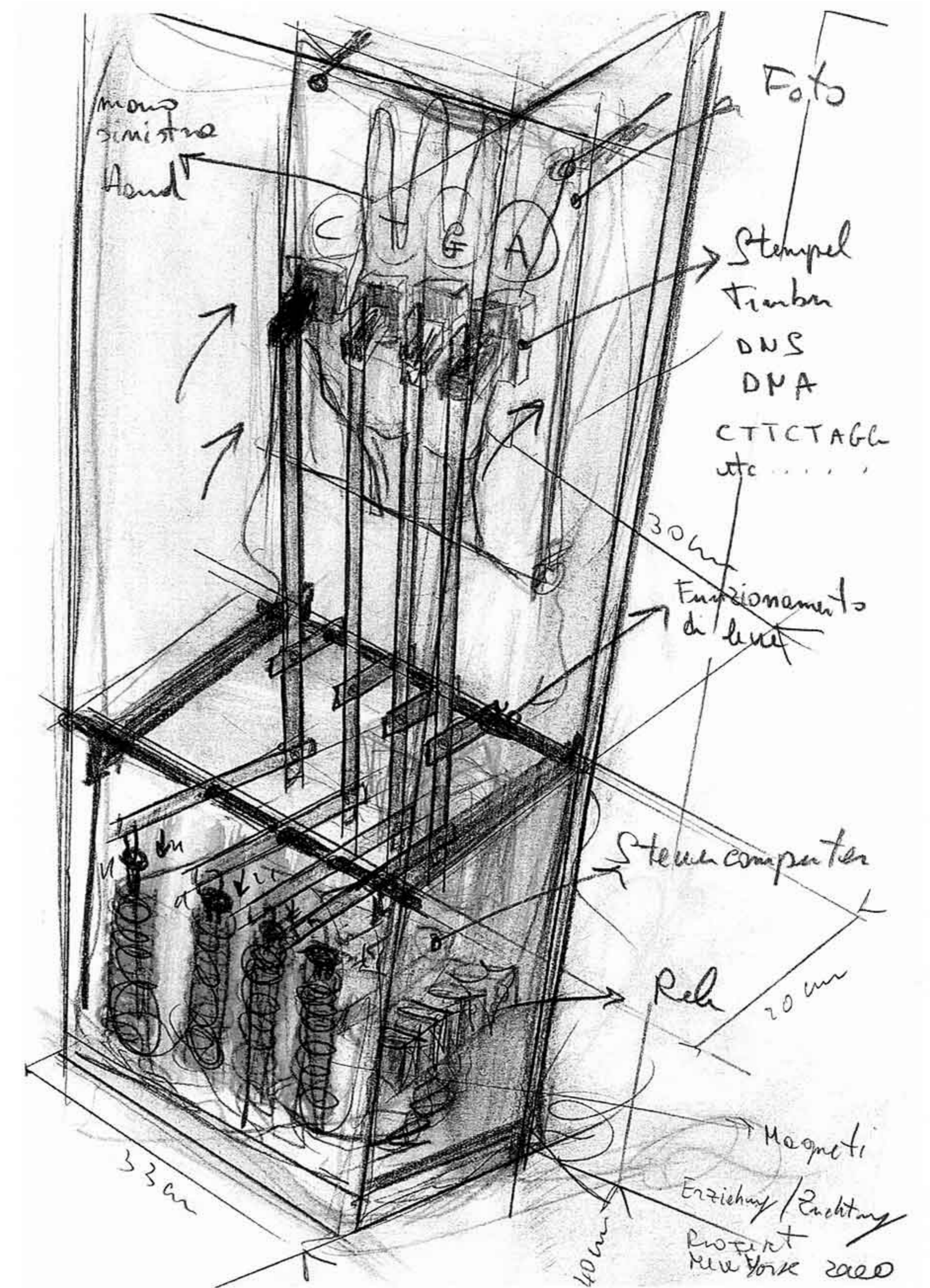
To an observer, Potsdamer Platz today looks much more like an affluent American suburb than anything remotely connected to Berlin or Germany. This might serve as a good starting point for reading the installations before you as a system of signs; many are questions, some are tentative answers, none are political or aesthetic dogmas. Costantino uses very sophisticated equipment in order to place a question mark over the particular union of technology, economic growth and progress at work in Germany today, and thus it is mistaken to see his art as a forlorn protest against science or technology as such. Instead, he is involved in a series of interrogations that move from the very specific form that the ideas of progress and growth assume in the new Potsdamer Platz, to the installations you are looking at now. Perhaps the most basic question is *Quo vadis homo sapiens?* The post-war economic miracle and the more recent reconstruction of Berlin seem to indicate a positive trajectory of increasing prosperity and democracy. Yet why is it that rather than

initiating a period of political experimentation and debate, the end of the Cold war seems to signify a narrowing of possible horizons and a homogenisation of lifestyles? Rather than rejoicing at the end of mutually assured destruction and taking this as the starting point for new forms of political pluralism well beyond mere consumer choice, the social relations implied by the Potsdamer Platz model of development seem to impose themselves as inevitable rather than desirable or possible. How has this happened?

Last summer in Rome, crowds came to hear the Pope's Jubilee speech searching for a message, as if somehow technological advance and the triumph of a certain kind of progress have deepened rather than alleviated basic fears humans have about nature, time and death. Working with Berlin as his background, Costantino Ciervo addresses the changing relations between humans and nature, as well as the idea that we are products of history as much as we are products of nature. In this context it could be argued that Potsdamer Platz resembles an American suburb not simply because of "globalisation". Armed with the symbols of Sony, Daimler, and McDonalds, what may actually be motivated by fear (of asking why the site was destroyed in the first place), looks like adaptability to change and responsiveness to consumer demand. Costantino Ciervo's installations dealing with time, genetic research and the specific form technological advance assumes within the framework of existing social relations raise many questions, such as: how does fear become collectively mobilised in the name of competitive finesse and innovation? Through what kinds of institutions and practices does aggression, when couched in the name of science or objectivity, begins to look like rationality and efficiency? Here the installations dealing with genetic research assume a particular importance within the general evolution of Costantino Ciervo's work, and once again he treats the phenomenon with far greater subtlety than the overwhelming majority of journalistic or "philosophical" interventions on the subject. It is not simply the fact that recent genetic discoveries raise the issues of cloning and euthanasia. If it is true that that both nature and history shape our development, there can be no pretended escape from the ethical-political dimension of history into the realm of pure science or neutral research. Without either demonising or glorifying medical science, Costantino Ciervo asks to what extent an antagonistic relation between humans and nature might also contribute, albeit quietly, to antagonistic and hierarchical relations between human beings.

Berlin is a city where the modes of individual and collective experience of the past intersect with those of the future. Costantino Ciervo's installations attempt to make the points of their intersection visible in ways that challenge widely accepted notions about politics, culture, science, technology and human nature. To this extent, he preserves a space for possible forms of individual and collective experience that have not yet been ruled out by currently prevailing institutions, and initiates a dialogue with viewers about what those forms might be.

—Darrow Schecter, School of European Studies, University of Sussex



Project: Education/Breeding

2000

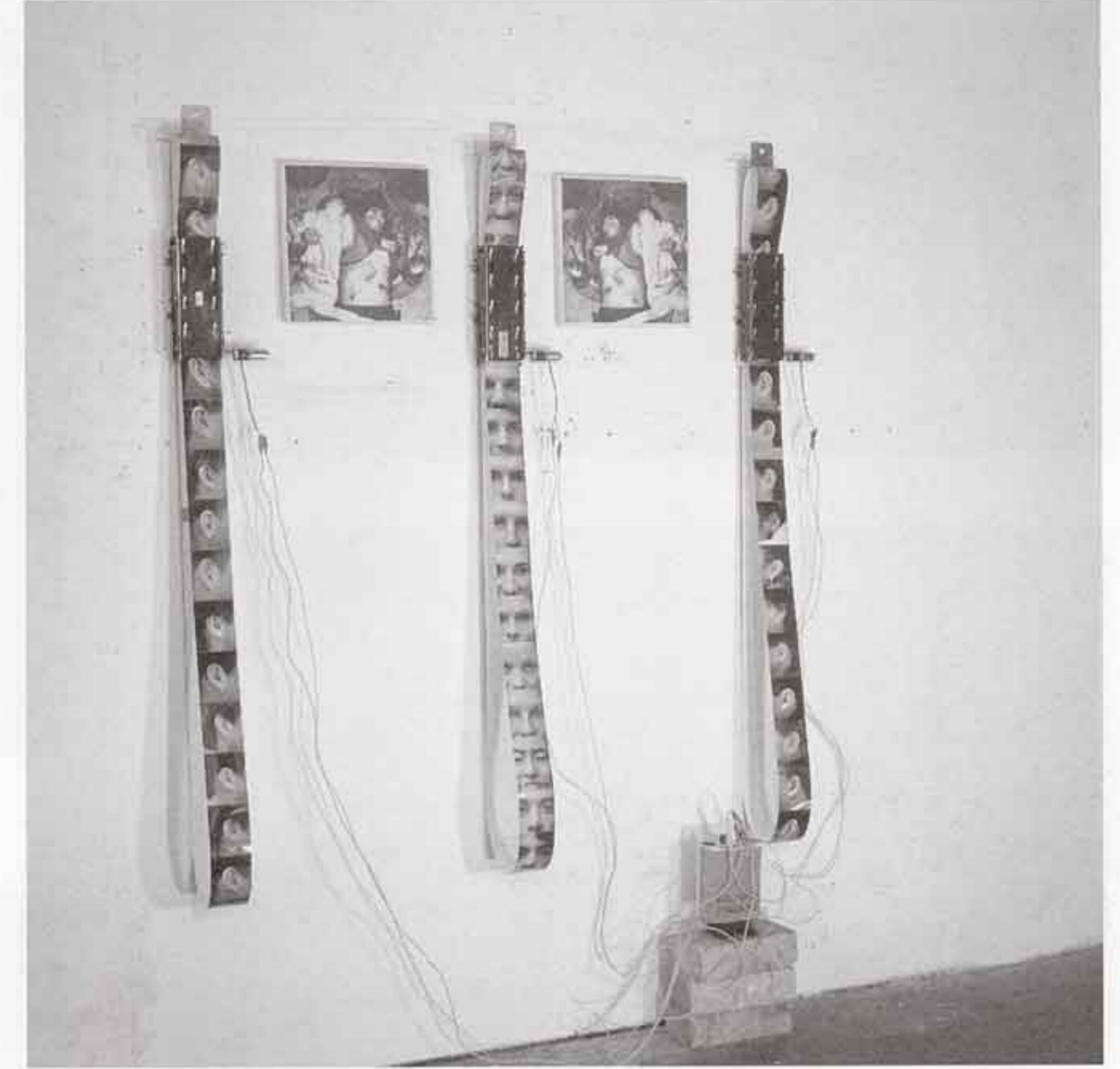
Pencil on paper

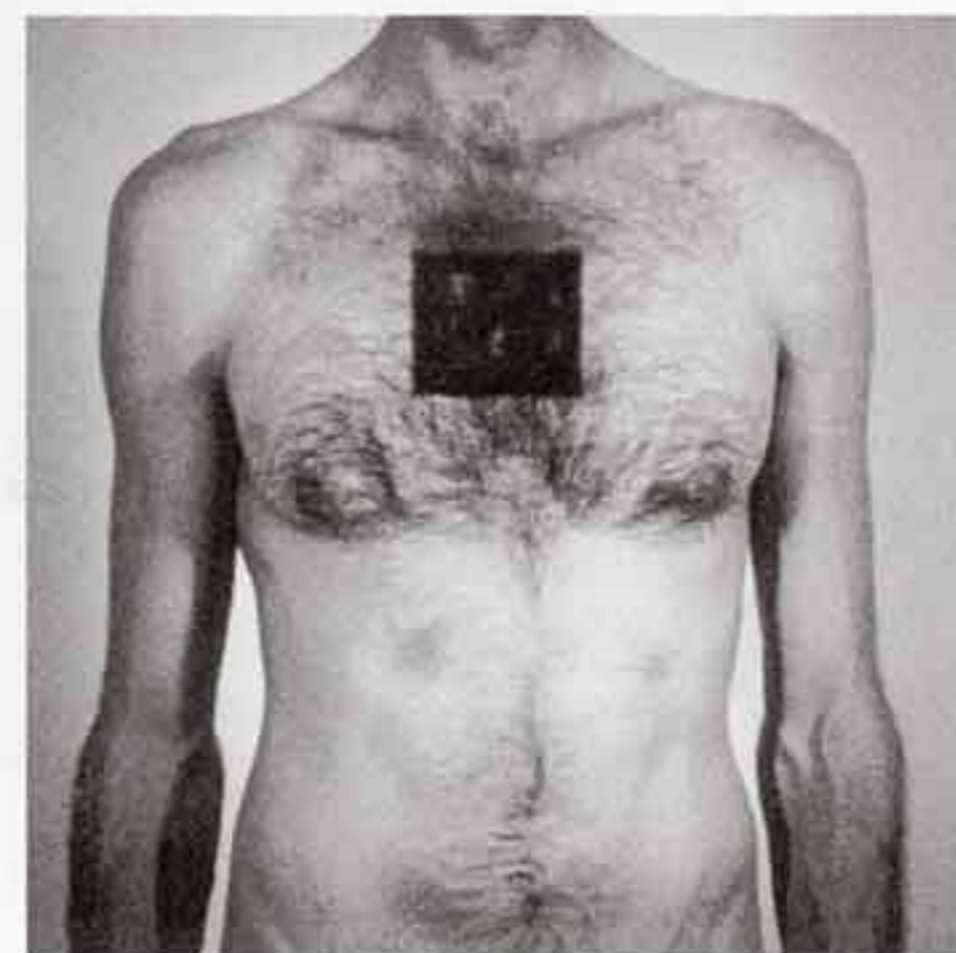
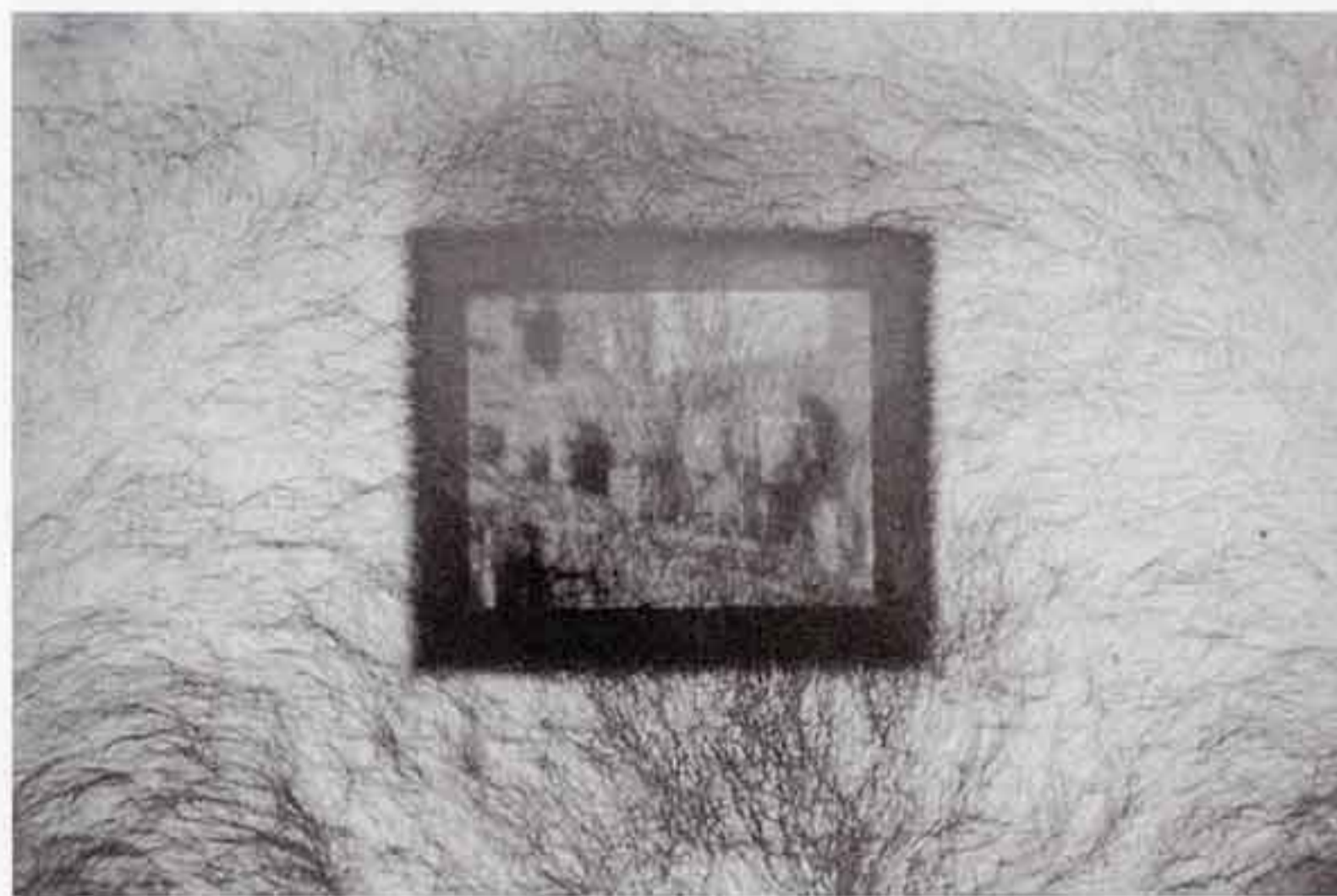
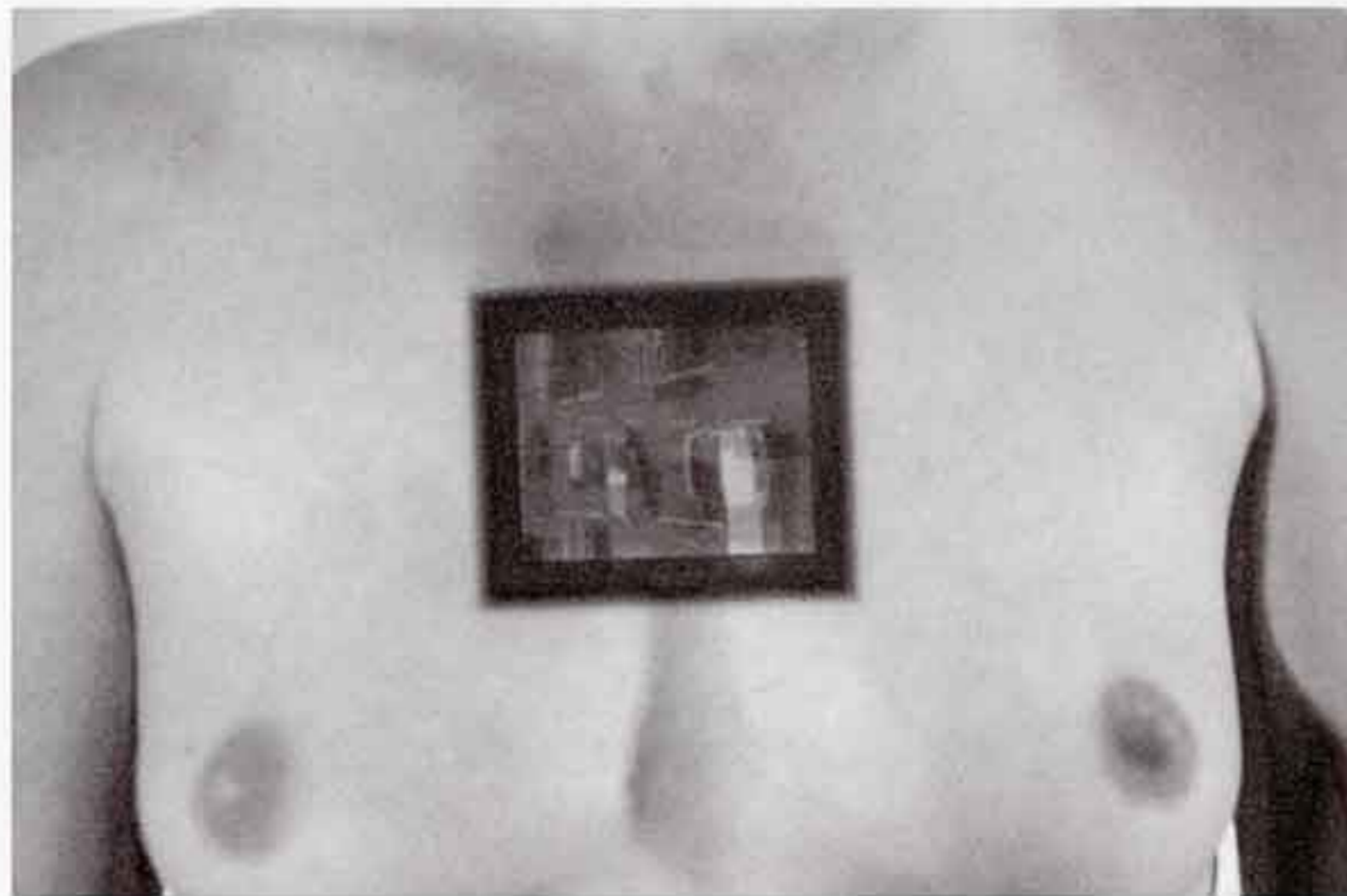
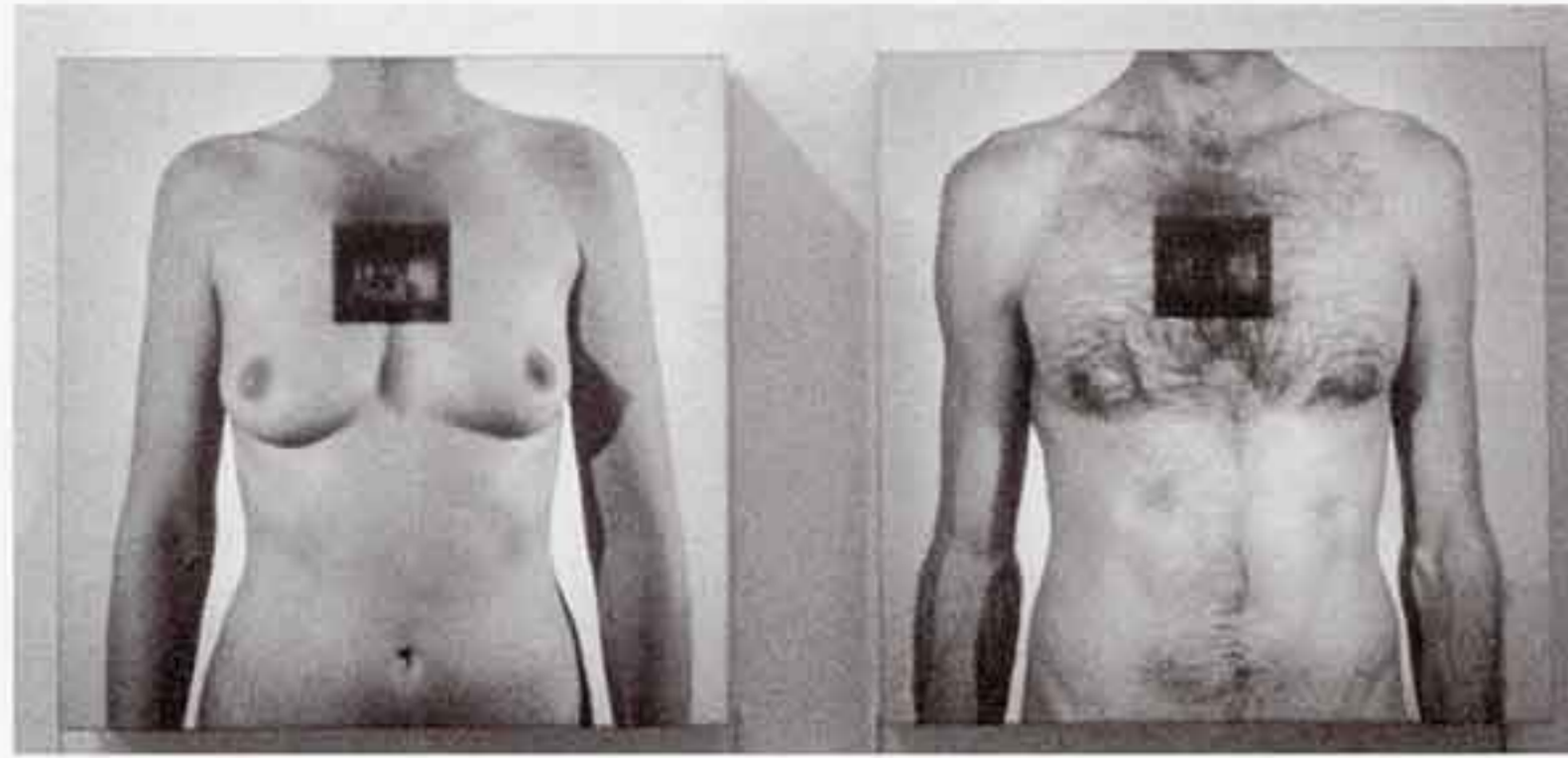


**TOTALITARIAN
OR AUTHORITARIAN**
The Third Is Out of Question
1996
Computerized light installation
(Berlin Central high-bunker,
metal, computer, neon tubes,
script, software, cable and wood)



The Promise
1996
Photo installation
(color photographs on paper
rolls, hot-printed fabric,
electric engines)
74.5" x 52" x 4"



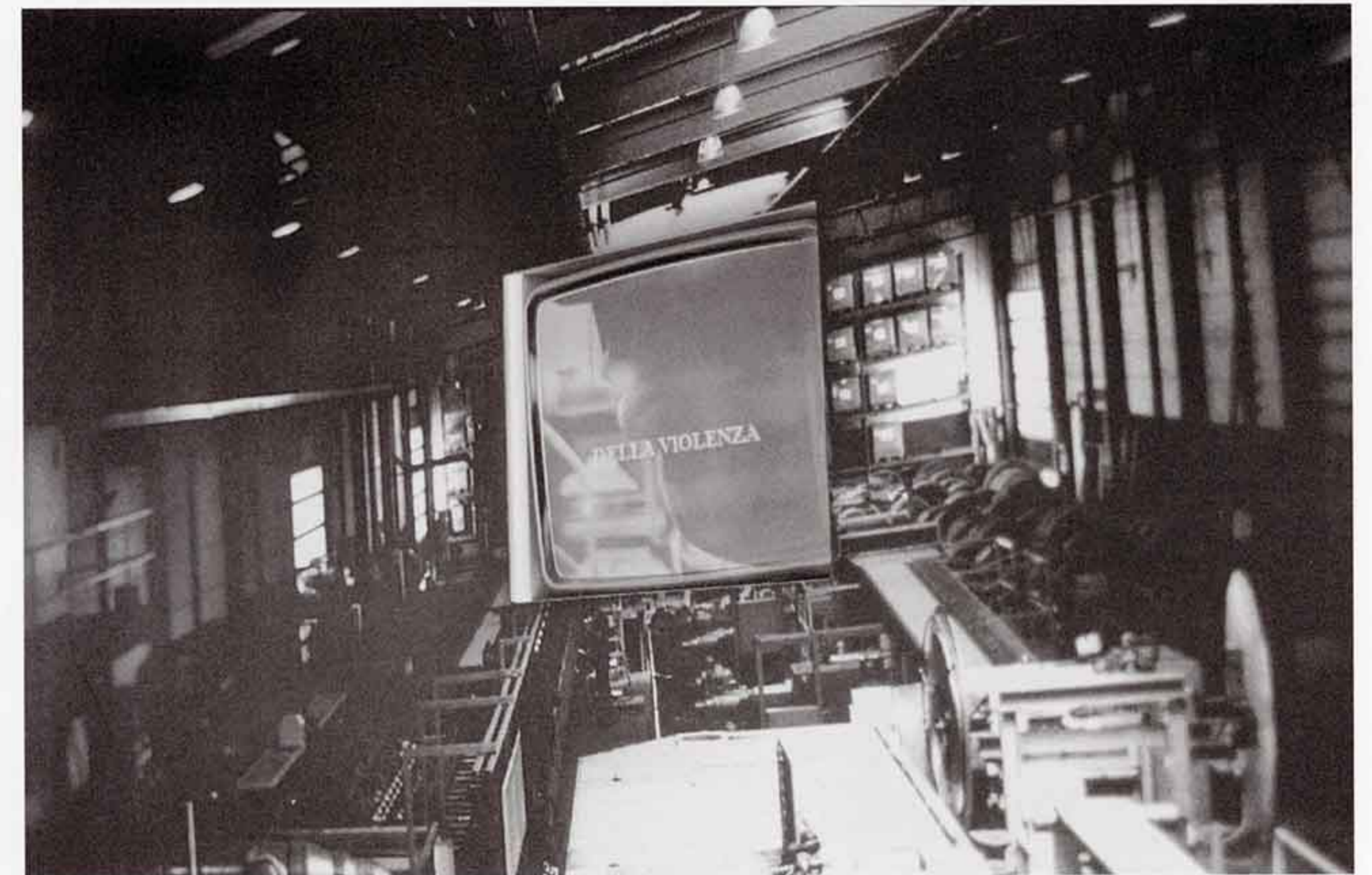
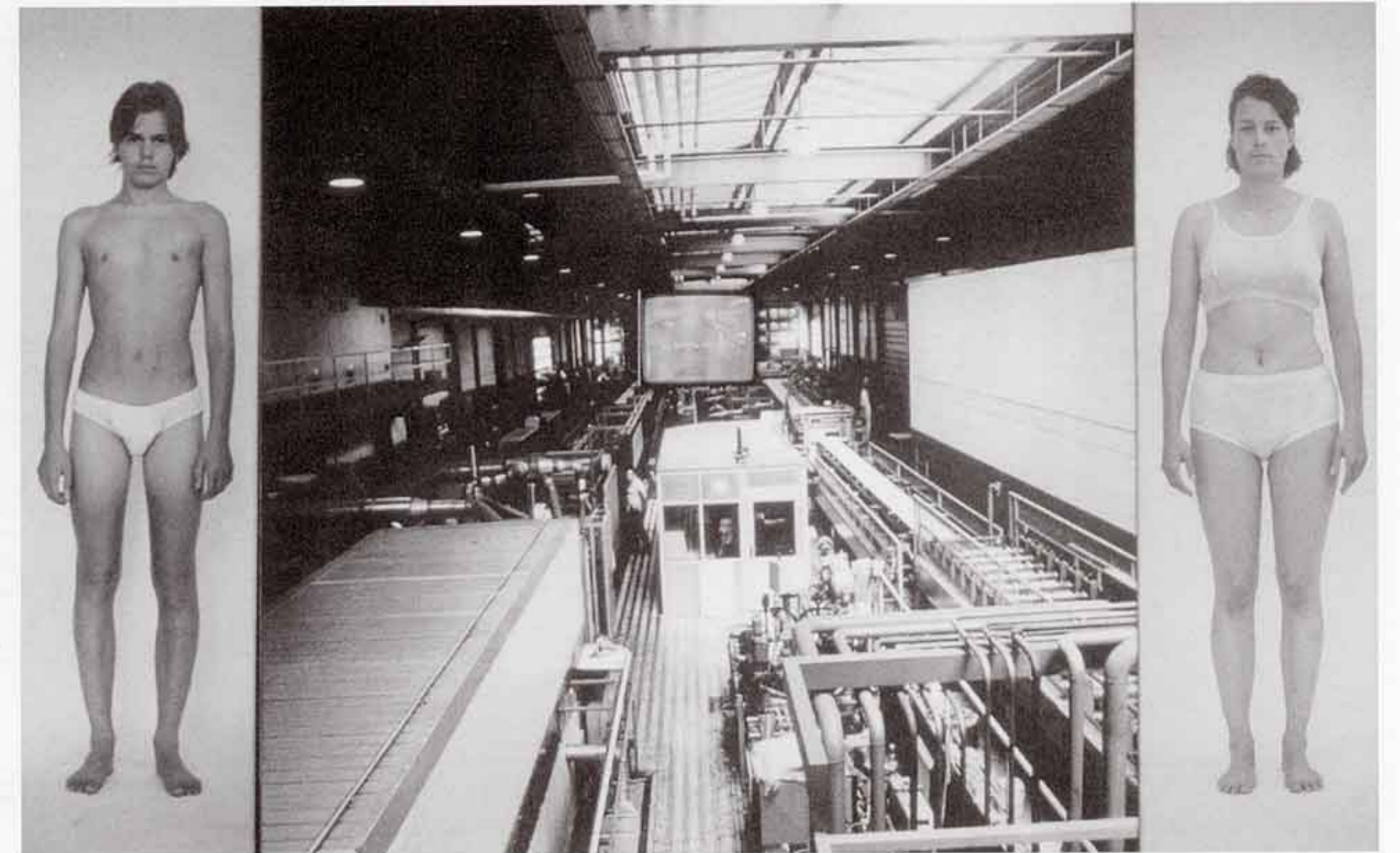


Opposite Direction

1997

Video object (light-box, monitor, videoplayer, original VHS tape, headphones)

40" x 80" x 16"



Nina and Ferdinand

1997

Video object (light-box, monitor, videoplayer, original VHS tape, headphones)

52" x 72" x 16"