



AINSLIE YULE
Sculptures and Drawings

The Scottish Arts Council

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The Fruit Market Gallery
29 Market Street, Edinburgh
8 April - 13 May 1978

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24th June to 28th July 1978

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Ainslie Yule is one of the most interesting sculptors working in Scotland, and his recent work seems to challenge most accepted ideas about sculpture. Sculpture is still normally seen as mass, or clear unambiguous structure, in solid enduring materials. It is usually raised to a convenient viewing height. Its fundamental unit of measurement is still the height of the human body. Ainslie Yule seems to have dispensed with most of these sculptural characteristics, and this note is meant to explore whether he has really done so, and what, if so, he has put in their place.

The most obvious feature of the work on show is that most of it rests on the floor – these are “floor pieces” in the artist’s terminology. The idea of placing sculptures directly on the floor is far from new. Sculptors of the human figure have emphasised the humanity of their work by not “putting it on a pedestal”. Constructed, abstract sculpture has rested on the floor because the flat plane of the floor signifies the ground, the irreducible basis on which all structures, and all measurement, depend, and because a base may very often obscure the vital relationship between this ground plane and the sculpture.

Much has been made of the abolition of the base in sculpture but in fact, the decision to have a base or not should be a purely functional one. The viewer of a life-size sculpture placed on the ground can meet it on his own level. By raising small or low sculptures near to eye level, the same equality of scale is partly preserved. Otherwise the viewer is obliged to view the sculpture as if from a high window, or from the upper tiers of a theatre. Obviously, anything that imposes such a relationship with the sculpture should not be left to chance, and although sculptors have often neglected the importance of the distance and angle of view, the present generation of sculptors is less likely to do so. We may be sure that Ainslie Yule has not put his sculptures on the floor for mere convenience or economy.

The next obviously unusual feature about Yule’s sculpture is the material he uses. We are accustomed to a wide variety of materials in recent sculpture but we seldom encounter materials so essentially two-dimensional and apparently flimsy. Actually the pieces are strong, since they employ a variety of single structural devices to help rigidity. But the roughly shaped pieces of hardboard, the bent wires, certainly look ephemeral. Once again a sculptor of Yule’s experience can hardly be unaware of this fact. The insubstantial materials (except in *Rock* and *Bird Sculpture*) are consistent with his avoidance of mass or volume. They do not seem to have any polemical, purpose, that is, Yule does not use their relative crudity as an associative factor in trying to establish a social or political locus for his work. His use of brilliant white surfaces seems designed to redeem the materials he uses from triviality. He does not admit to making “throw-away” sculptures in spite of the problems of preservation they pose. His distinguished lineal antecedent, Kurt Schwitters (whose work Yule is not at all familiar with) took the same view.

If these are not throw-away sculptures there is, undeniably, an element of theatrical illusion about them. The element of theatre about the finished product must be acknowledged, but it is less obvious than the sleight-of-hand with which the artist deals with the work in the studio, causing elaborate constructs to appear rapidly out of very little. That is not to say that Yule is ad-libbing or working without a precise plan. On the contrary the floor pieces are most carefully planned, and the relationship between the ‘given’ elements that are fixed to the board, and the moveable ones, is important to the sculptor. Each moveable element has a correct place, and is assembled with its neighbours into a strong structure by the use of tension only, without mechanical fixing. Only a few of these elements are ‘variables’ whose relation to the rest permits movement in the completed structure.

Thus Ainslie Yule seems to deny the traditional nature of sculpture on at least three counts: in purposely restricting the view of the

sculpture by putting low pieces on the floor, by avoiding any treatment of mass, and by using flimsy and essentially two-dimensional materials loosely assembled for exhibition. There is, of course, ample precedent for all these features in a general way but the precise use Yule has made of them adds up to a new and highly interesting phenomenon. The meeting of painting and sculpture has become a tiresome commonplace of recent art history, but few sculptors indeed have actually studied the implications and possibilities of such common ground. Modern painting has often aspired to the sculptural, but the reverse has seldom been true since the end of the 19th century. Only the great painters turned part-time sculptors, Boccioni, Matisse and Picasso, have shown any far-reaching understanding of pictorial values in sculpture, in a form accessible to us to-day. Had the sculpture of the early Russian avant-garde survived, the list would have been longer. The pictorial and environmental 'sculpture' of Kurt Schwitters has also mostly perished. All these artists knew in their different ways how to break the confines of objecthood in sculpture and reach the imaginative extension into space and the more varied empathetic response that painting can enjoy. The contribution of Picasso to sculpture was incomparably rich, not only in those respects but in subverting all ideas of sculptural materials, in including found objects and from that, introducing the whole idea of metamorphism to sculpture. Picasso as a sculptor is Yule's acknowledged idol, although it seems to this writer that Kurt Schwitters' destroyed *Merzbau* and to some extent his relief sculptures, are the most direct, and quite uncausative, precedents for Yule's work. Schwitters has naturally had his followers, but his influence has been mainly on wall-oriented work, reliefs and collages.

There is one other body of work which satisfies, on a grand scale, the criterion of a truly pictorial sculpture, and that is the art of stage design. This was a splendid achievement of early Soviet art, and models for stage settings easily rank with their non-functional sculptural

constructions. The conception of sculpture as a stage on which something is enacted is found from time to time elsewhere, most conspicuously in the surrealist sculpture of Giacometti, who in turn influenced the plural pieces of Barbara Hepworth where various forms relate to each other on a horizontal base. Yule acknowledges Giacometti's importance to him, and indeed the latter explores problems of scale and problems about identifying with sculpture which clearly preoccupy Yule, while the dazzling powdery whiteness of Giacometti's plasters is precedent for the predominant white in this exhibition. Giacometti is another artist whose powers were evenly divided between sculpture and painting, and whose sculpture is seldom concerned with the surface of volume. Instead he was interested in creating imaginary atmospheres, peopled by presences whose actual substance is so reduced as to be almost illusory, and these presences have a remarkable identity in painting and in sculpture alike.

So it is the tradition of the Russians, of Schwitters and of Giacometti, and to a lesser extent of Picasso, that I would place Ainslie Yule. In a word, the tradition of pictorial sculpture. I believe he has extended the tradition quite significantly. A lot has been heard of 'drawing in space', meaning the use of wire or thin metal to make three-dimensional lines, a device also used by Yule. Painting in space has less often been attempted. But this is what Yule seems to be doing in these floor pieces. Let us see then whether the characteristics we have noted are logical when seen in this light. It seems puzzling at first that Yule has rejected the traditional compromise between painting and sculpture, the vertical relief. But really he would have lost everything by doing so, except the frontal view, the opportunity to see the structure *as a painting*. Yule is more ambitious, in presenting the work both as structure *and* painting. The horizontal plane locates the work as not an illusion but a piece of real space, with which we can relate with our feet as well as our eyes. The oblique view we are obliged to take, and the distance we are obliged

to keep if we want to stay upright, foster this half illusion and encourage an identification with a real location. Down there can easily become a place, a site or, most obviously, a stage. None of this would have been possible in an upright plane. Moreover the relationship of the parts to the whole would have been totally different. The parts rest on the ground, they do not depend on it, or from it.

The use of two-dimensional materials is also explained by the pictorial analogy. In cubist painting one may notice that while some lesser artists painted facets, faceted objects or 'cubes' in fact, Braque and Picasso painted *planes*. As supreme painters they rejected the outward surface in favour of a rich, pictorial, semi-illusionist structure of painted planes which do not define surfaces at all but articulate space. In the same way Yule's painted boards are isolated planes in space, they cannot be the surfaces of objects. To pursue the analogy with cubism, the real solids introduced into the floor pieces may have a similar role to the collage elements in later Braque and Picasso. They provide a fixed point of departure for the imaginative interpretation of the rest.

None of the foregoing has given much clue to the nature of what Ainslie Yule is unfolding on his stage. By concentrating on the general nature of the floor pieces, especially, I may have minimised the direct experience of an original artist which can be got by examining the elements Yule actually uses. Another look at the works will show that although I have used the analogy of a stage in referring to these works, in reality they are far too crowded to represent an *empty* stage, on which we as spectators may imagine ourselves. But the analogy continues to be useful, if we consider that what occupies the stage are not so much props as *traces*, traces of actions performed or being performed. The crisp line drawn on the white ground is redolent of energy. The shaped wire develops this energy into a theme. The regular forms of the thin metal tripods provide a rhythmic support. An upright rod provides a vertical with which we may identify, a point of entry to the composition. Three-fingered shapes

indicate a gathering of dramatic tension. The white planes paint the environment—they also hide, sometimes, forms which have become too strong. In this world of 'signs of life', the solid form of a crow-step gable or a long horizontal channel seems unbearably concrete. A few years ago Yule was pre-occupied with objects, as heavily material as he could make them. But when objects appear in his latest work their specific volumes are carefully obscured.

In marshalling all these elements Yule functions as an impressive and inventive painter in space whose affinities turn out to be, surprisingly, with abstract expressionism. Turning from the large drawing *Proposition for Floor Piece* (27) to the floor pieces themselves, one is reminded of the enormous power of illusion possessed by painting and drawing, compared with the burden of actuality in sculpture. This is the wide gulf that Yule has tried to cross, with a very fair degree of success. For what purpose, is a legitimate question. To stretch the limits of a medium is always worth doing, and a good way of understanding both limits and medium. In common with most artists of his generation, Yule offers the work in the present exhibition as 'work in progress', but with better reason than many. The work is almost perceptibly evolving and will certainly carry the sculptor to further extremely interesting conclusions.

Douglas Hall

Biography

- 1941 Born North Berwick, East Lothian
1959/64 Edinburgh College of Art
Andrew Grant post graduate scholar
1964 Travelling scholarship to New York
1974-75 Gregory Fellow in Sculpture at Leeds University
1973 Scottish Arts Council Award
1975 Scottish Arts Council Bursary
Lecturer in Design at Gray's
School of Art, Aberdeen

One man exhibitions

- 1969 Paintings and lithographs,
New '57 Gallery, Edinburgh
1972 Sculptures
Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh
1973 Sculptures and drawings,
Serpentine Gallery, London
1976 Drawings,
Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh
1976 Drawings,
Park Square Gallery, Leeds.
1977 Drawings and lithographs,
Aberdeen Art Gallery,
Scottish Arts Council, Charlotte Square, Edinburgh,
Editions Alecto, London.

Public Collections

- Aberdeen Art Gallery
Ulster Museum, Belfast
Camden Borough Council
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art
Leeds City Art Gallery
Leeds Education Department
Contemporary Arts Society
The Open University
The Scottish Arts Council
Southern Arts Association
Various private collections in Europe and U.S.A.

Selected group shows

- 1972 Art Spectrum, Scotland
Aberdeen Art Gallery,
Dundee City Art Gallery
McLellan Galleries, Glasgow
1973 Earth Images,
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art
Whitechapel Gallery, London
1974 Three Scottish Artists,
Galleria Del Cavallioro, Venice.
1974 Gubbio Ceramic Biennale, Italy
A Ceramic Workshop, Edinburgh,
1974 Scottish and English Watercolours at
Burleighfield House.
1975 Scottish Sculpture 1975
Edinburgh, Leeds, Glasgow
1975 London Group, Camden Arts Centre
1975 Working Drawings
Leeds University
1975 The Need to Draw - 20th Century Scottish Drawing,
Edinburgh.
1976-77 Scottish Television Edinburgh Festival Exhibition
1977 "Inscape", Scottish Arts Council Exhibition selected
by Paul Overy.
Edinburgh, London, Belfast.
1977 Silver Jubilee Exhibition of Contemporary British
Sculpture.
Battersea Park, London.
1977 Silver Jubilee Exhibition of Contemporary British
Sculpture, Redfern Gallery, London.
1977 Beograd '77 (Beograd '77)
Represented Great Britain with Ian Hamilton Finlay
and Glen Onwin—arranged by the Scottish National
Gallery of Modern Art.
1978 Beograd '77 exhibits shown at Scottish National
Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh.

Sculptures

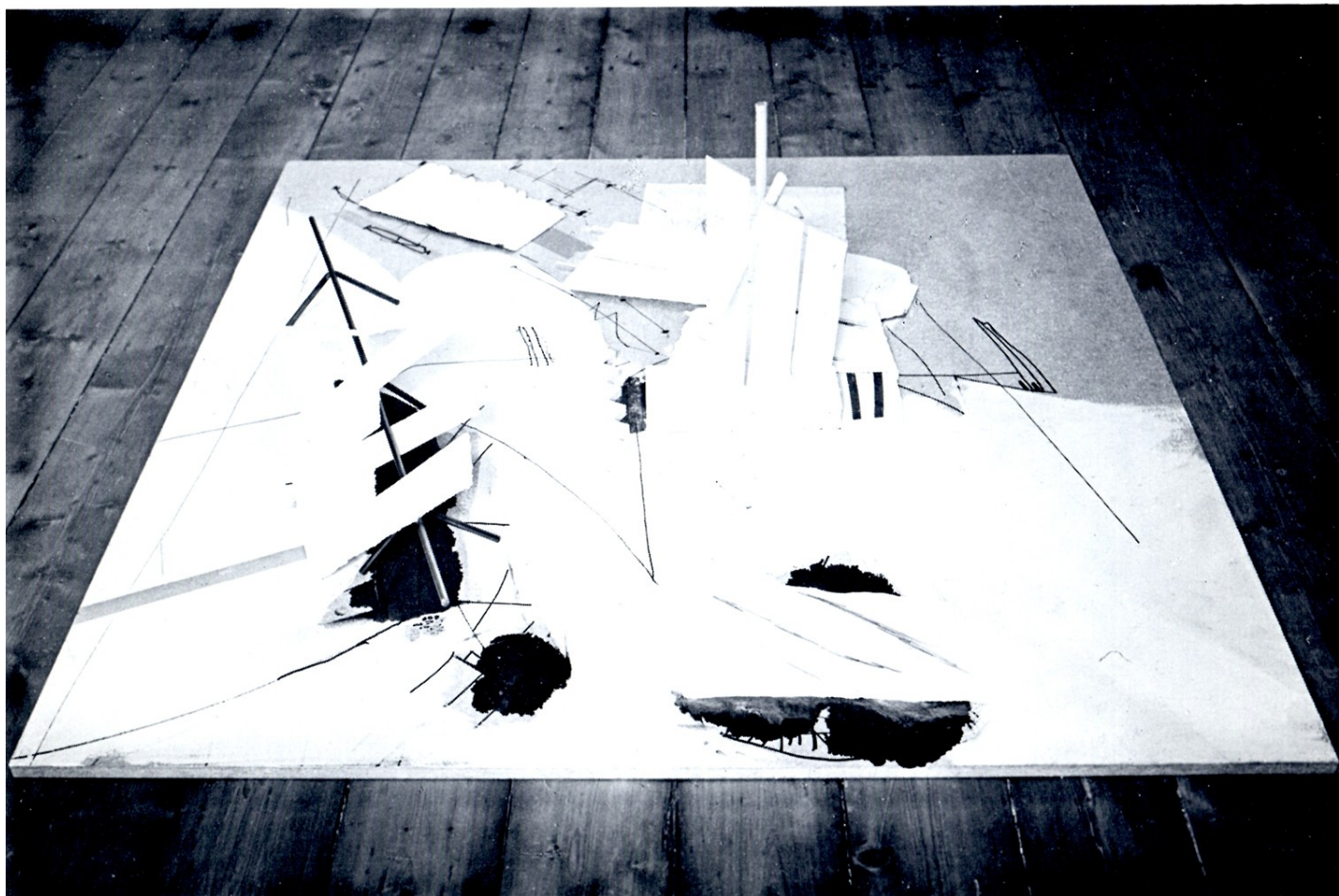
Dimensions in cms. Height precedes width.

- 1 **Development of a drawing**
Wood . plaster . steel . dye
20 cm x 12.20 cm x 12.20 cm
1978
- 2 **Composition with four wooden, and two steel elements, on a wood and plaster base.**
15 cm x 12.20 cm x 12.20 cm
1977
- 3 **Floor Sculpture**
Wood . plaster . acrylic . dye
15 cm x 122 cm x 122 cm
1978
- 4 **Composition on tile-like base**
Wood . plaster . acrylic . steel
90 cm x 122 cm x 122 cm
1978
- 5 **Composition employing angled parts**
Wood . plaster . acrylic . steel . pencil
75 cm x 122 cm x 122 cm
- 6 **Composition**
Wood . plaster . steel . marker pen
20 cm x 122 cm x 183 cm
1977
- 7 **Composition with trestles and fragments**
Cotton . steel . wood . paper
30 cm x 275 cm x 366 cm
1978
- 8 **'Rack'**
Steel and wood (representing slate)
90 cm x 366 cm x 366 cm
First shown at Jubilee Exhibition on Contemporary British Sculpture, Battersea Park, Summer 1977
1977
- 9 **'Rack'**
Scale model in brass—painted
15 cm x 53 cm x 53 cm
1977
- 10 **Bird Sculpture**
Wood-stained
70 cm x 140 cm x 25 cm
1977
- 11 **Floor Sculpture**
Wood . stone . acrylic . plaster
153 cm x 240 cm x 244 cm
1978
- 12 **Trestle Sculpture**
Wood . plaster . acrylic
142 cm x 250 cm x 100 cm

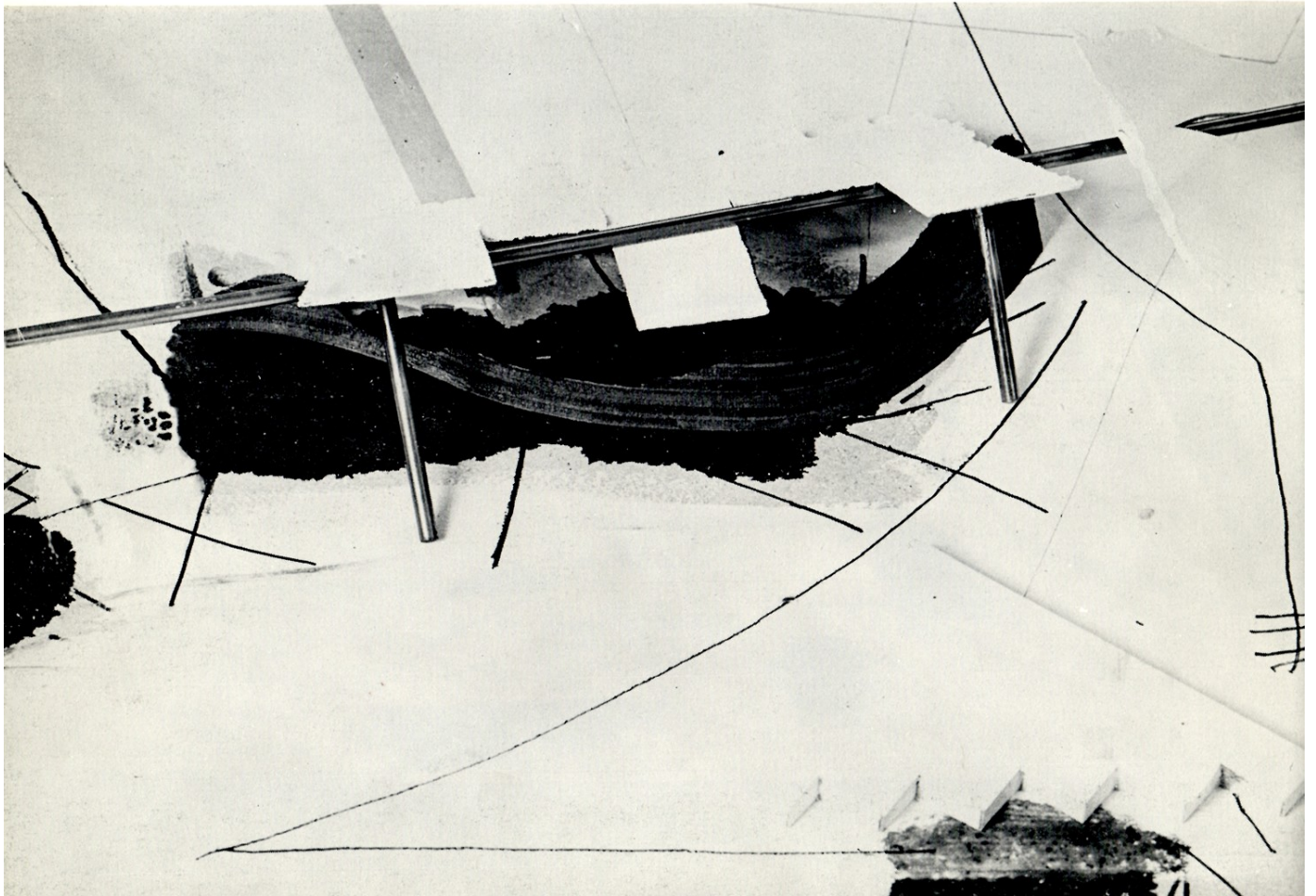
Drawings

- 13 **Various arrangements**
Mixed media
65 cm x 90 cm
1978
- 14 **Drawing for floor sculpture with two trestles**
Mixed media
65 cm x 90 cm
- 15 **Red—covered up**
Mixed media
110 cm x 98 cm
1978
Property of the Southern Arts Association
- 16 **Yellow drawing**
Mixed media
110 cm x 98 cm
1978
- 17 **Composition with 'T' shape**
Mixed media
98 cm x 110 cm
1977
- 18 **Composition with ink, charcoal and powder colour**
98 cm x 110 cm
1977
- 19 **Linear arrangement**
Ink, acrylic, charcoal
98 cm x 110 cm
1978
- 20 **Variations on a theme borrowed from Man Ray**
Collage
98 cm x 110 cm
1977
- 21 **Progression**
Charcoal
98 cm x 110 cm
1977
- 22 **Design for Sculpture installation**
Mixed media
98 cm x 110 cm
1978
Property of the Southern Arts Association
- 23 **Image with two black elements**
Mixed media
98 cm x 110 cm
- 24 **Associated images on ochre colour field**
Ink, charcoal & powder/colour
98 cm x 110 cm
1977
- 25 **Three related objects on sand**
Mixed media
71 cm x 98 cm
1977
- 26 **Drawing for floorpiece—Two objects**
Mixed media
71 cm x 99 cm
1977
- 27 **Proposition for floorpiece**
Mixed media
98 cm x 115 cm
1977
- 28 **Drawing for floorpiece with grid**
Mixed media
71 cm x 99 cm
1977
- 29 **Loose grid drawing**
Mixed media
110 cm x 98 cm
1978
- 30 **Grid drawing**
Mixed media
98 cm x 110 cm
1978
- 31 **Conflicting image associations**
mixed media
98 cms x 110 cms
1978
- 32 **Superimposed diagrams**
mixed media
110 cms x 98 cms
1978

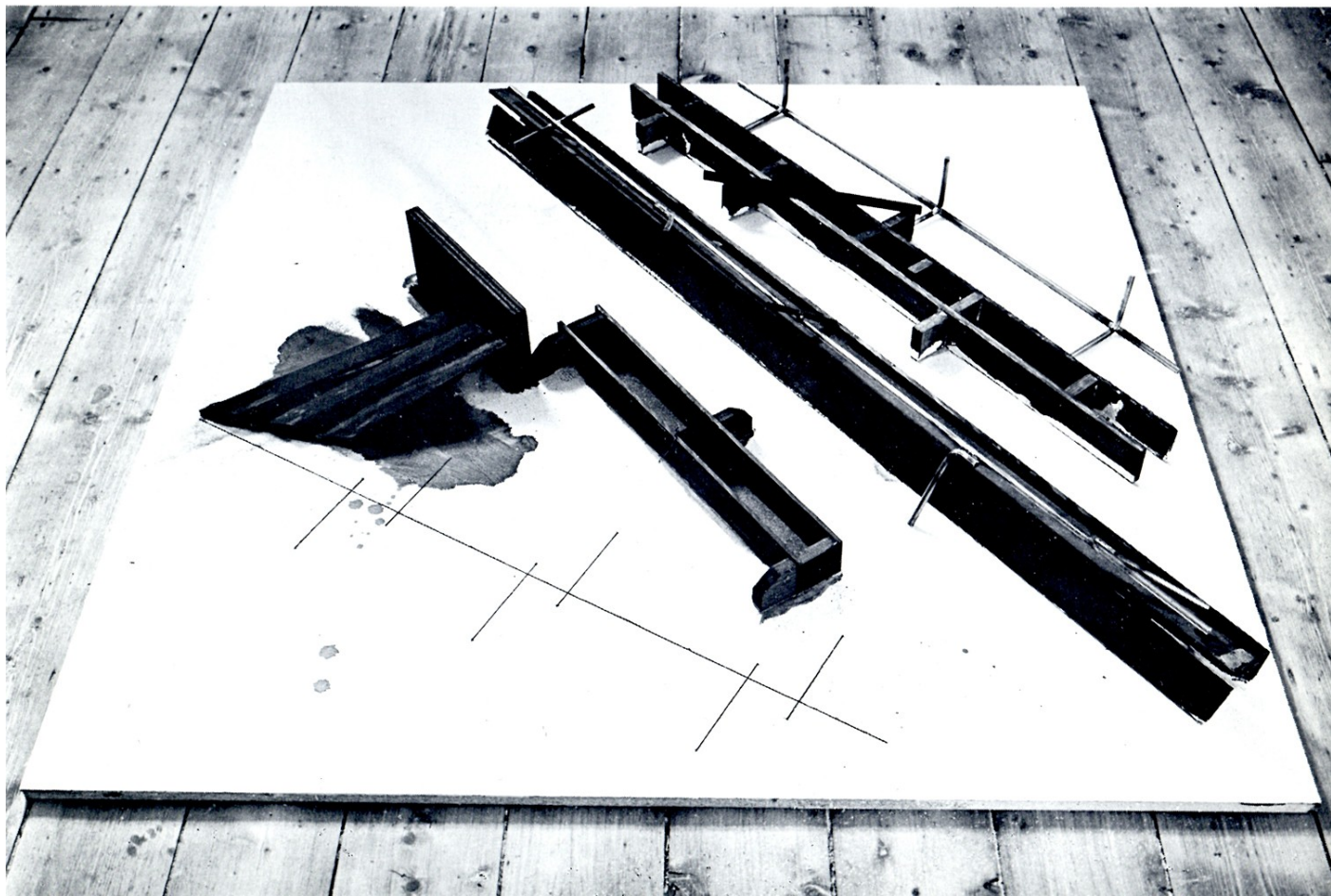
1 Development of a drawing



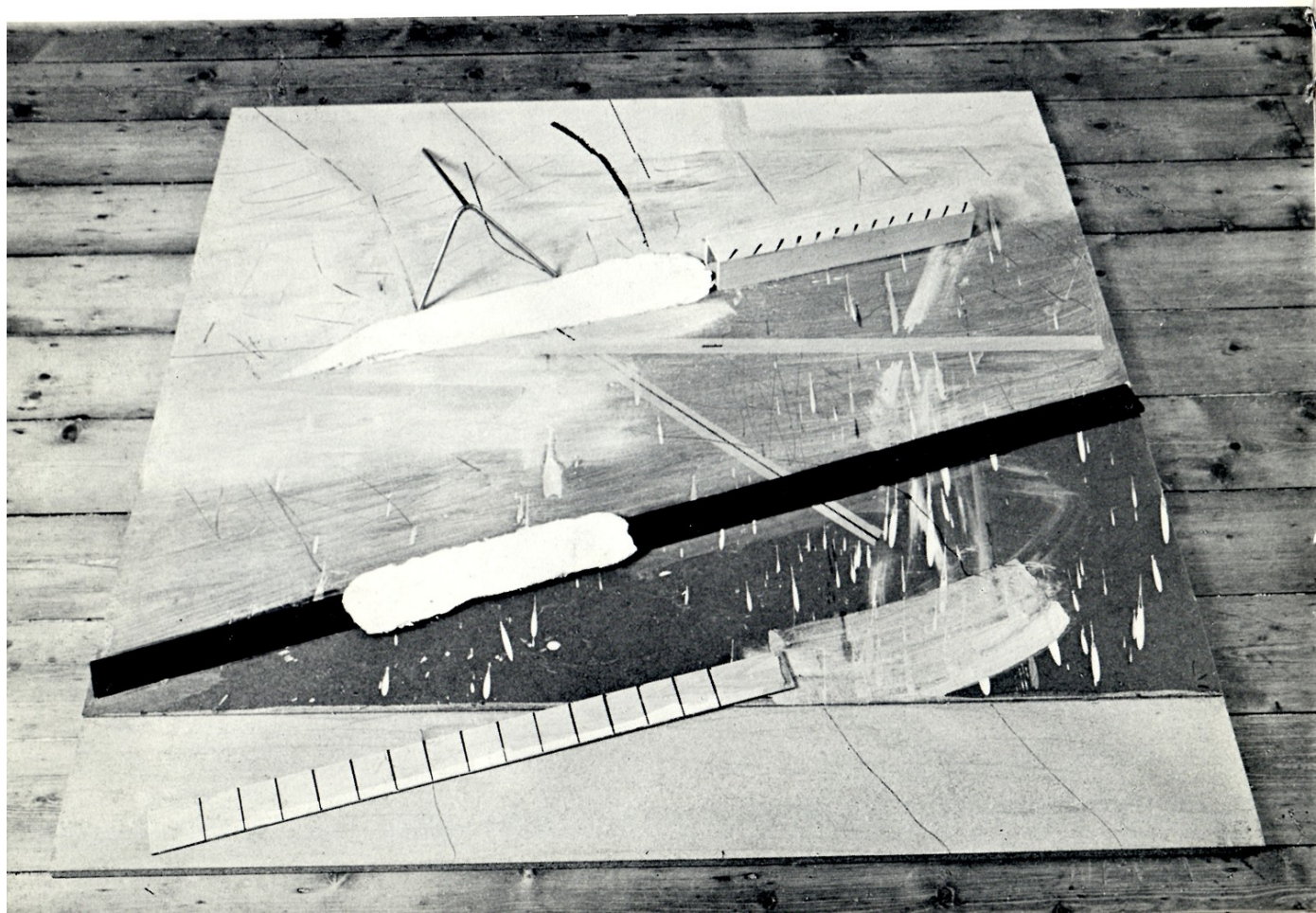
1 Development of a drawing Detail



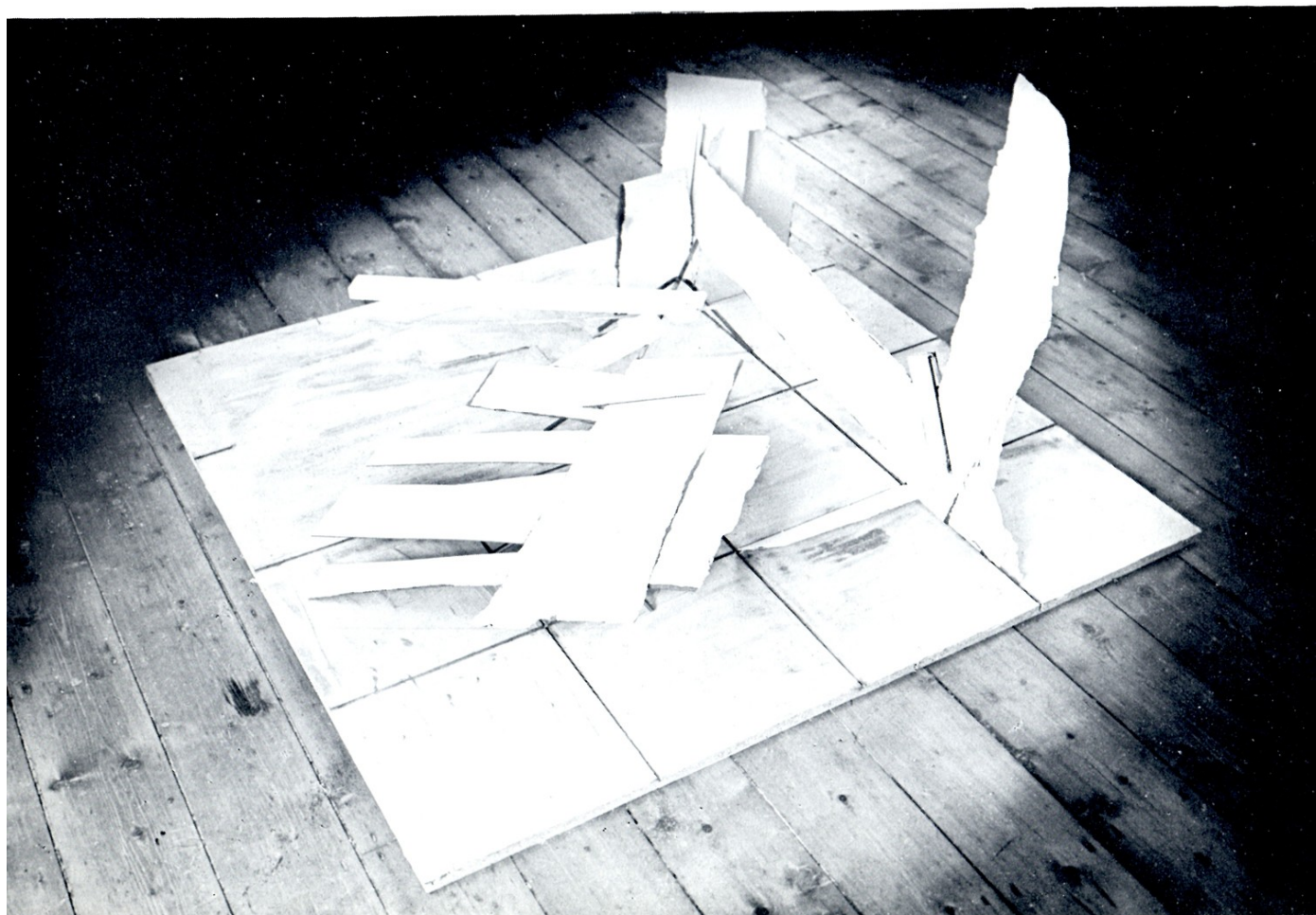
- 2 Composition with four wooden, and two steel elements, on a wood and plaster base.



3 Floor Sculpture



4 Composition on tile-like base

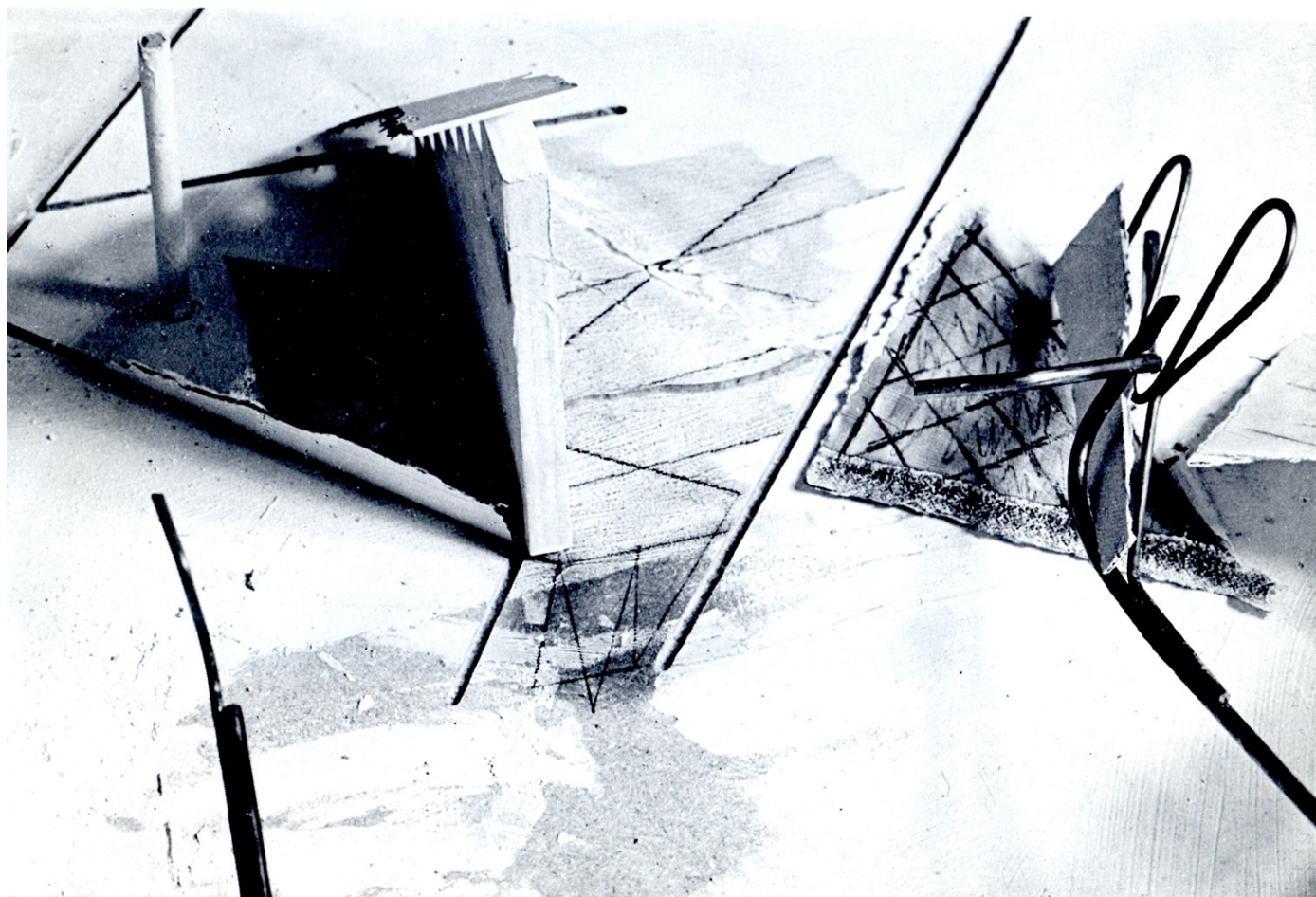


5 Composition employing angled parts

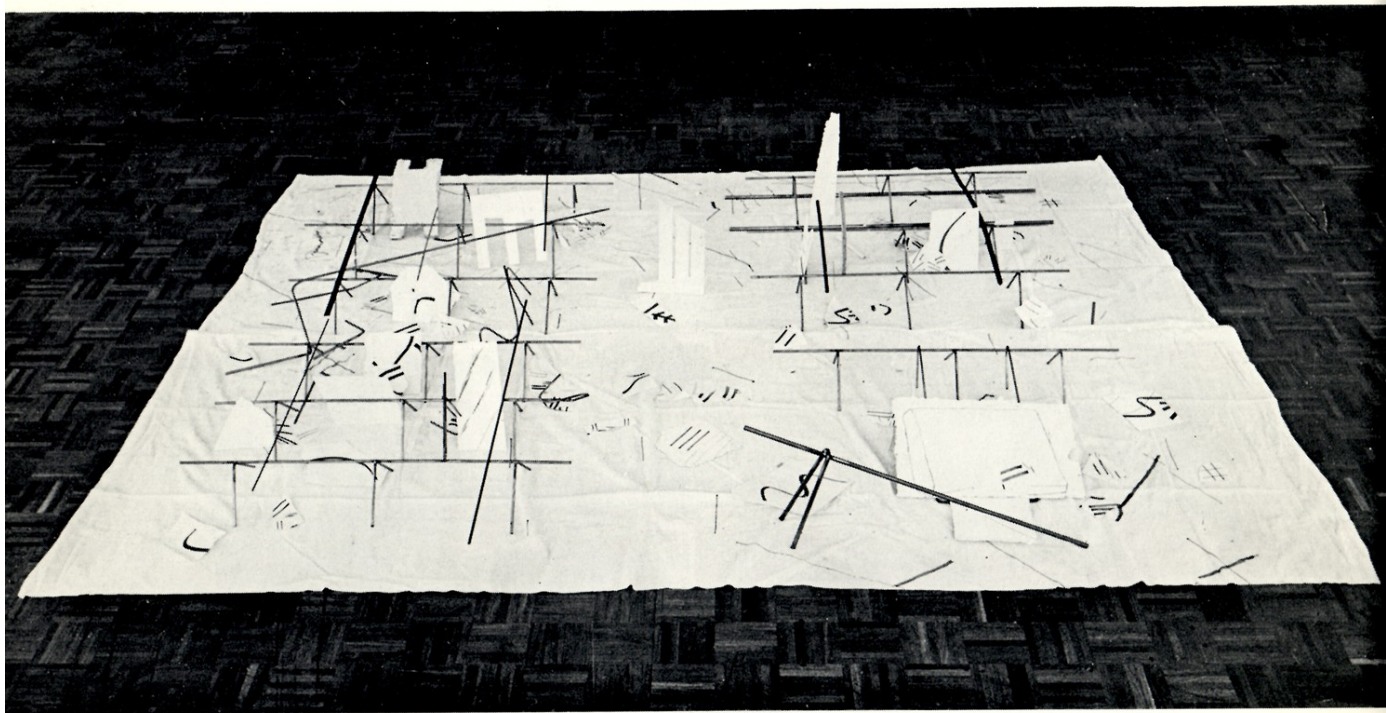


5 Composition employing angled parts

Detail



7 Composition with trestles and fragments

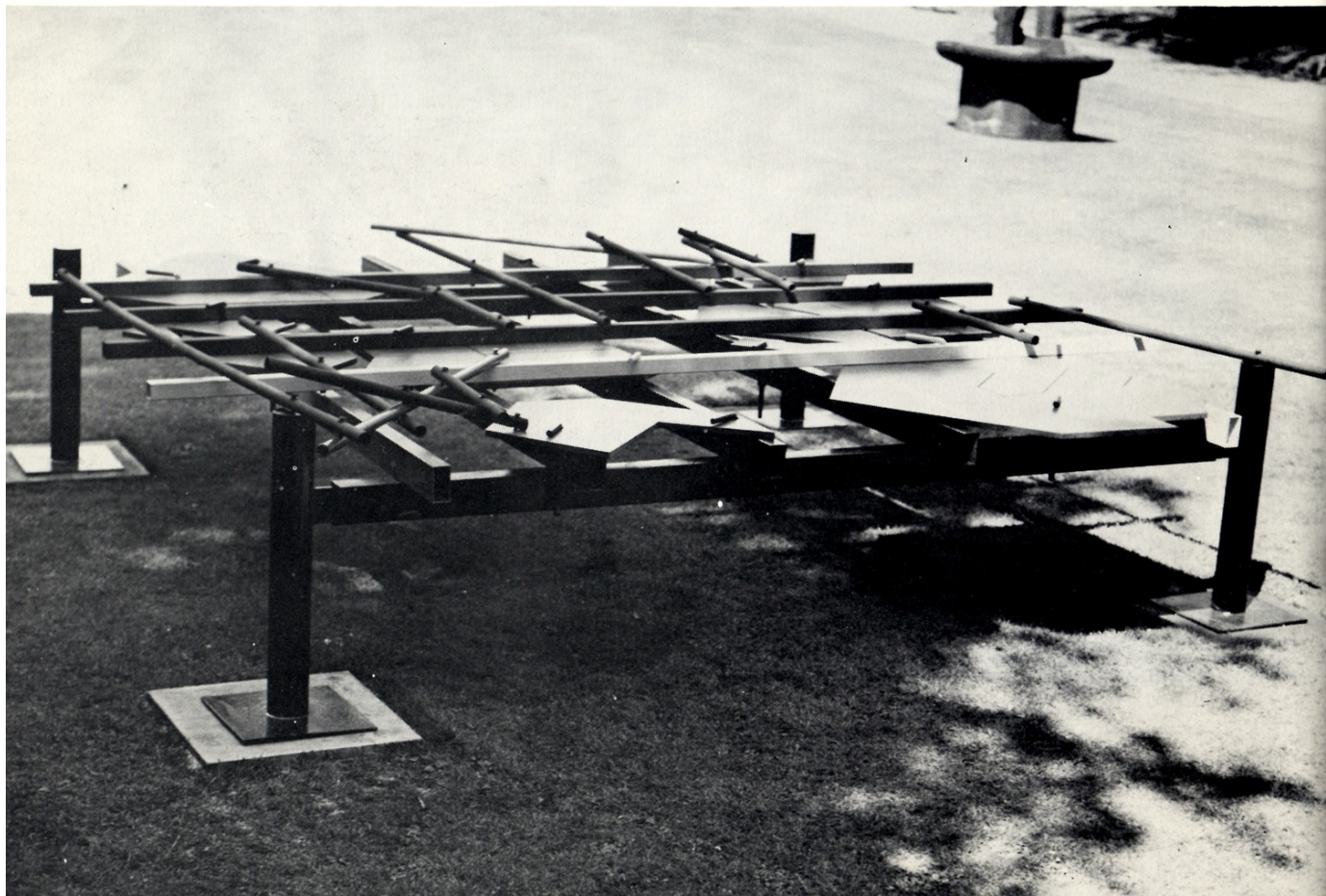


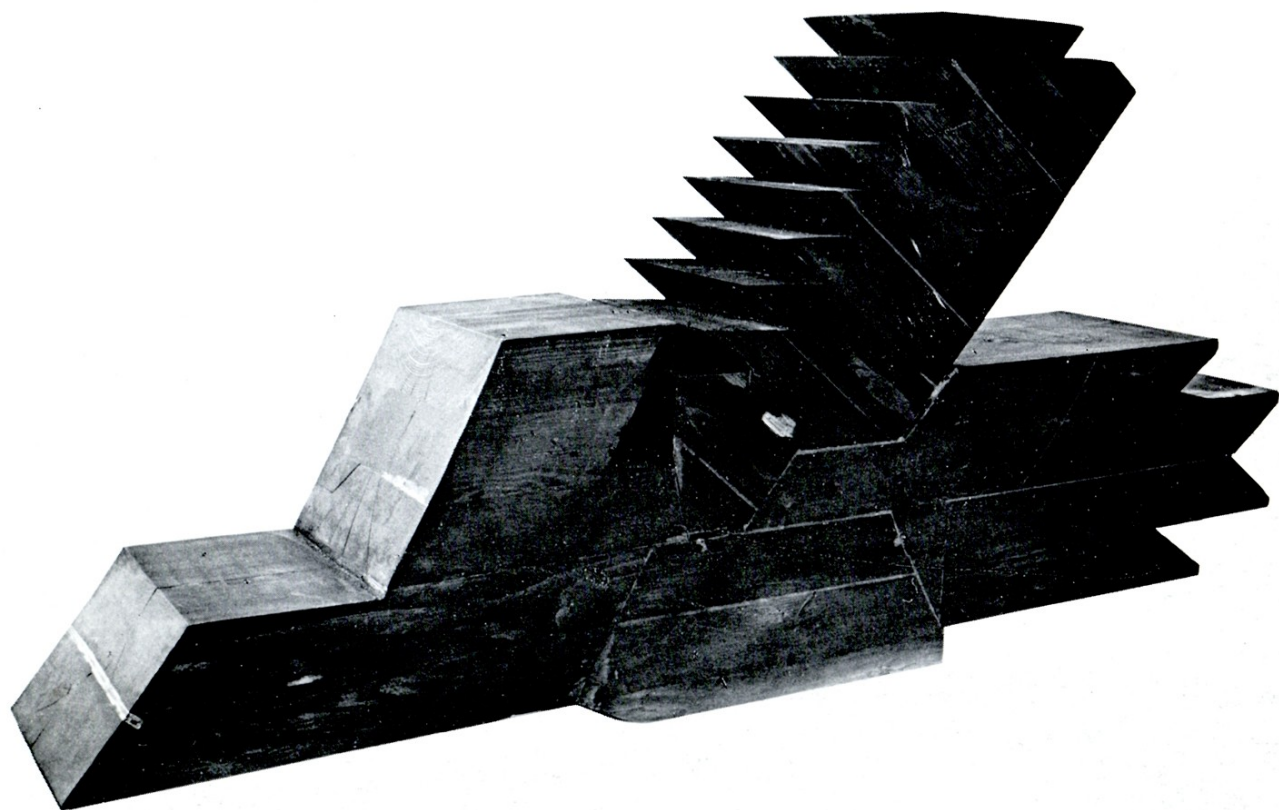
7 Composition with trestles
and fragments

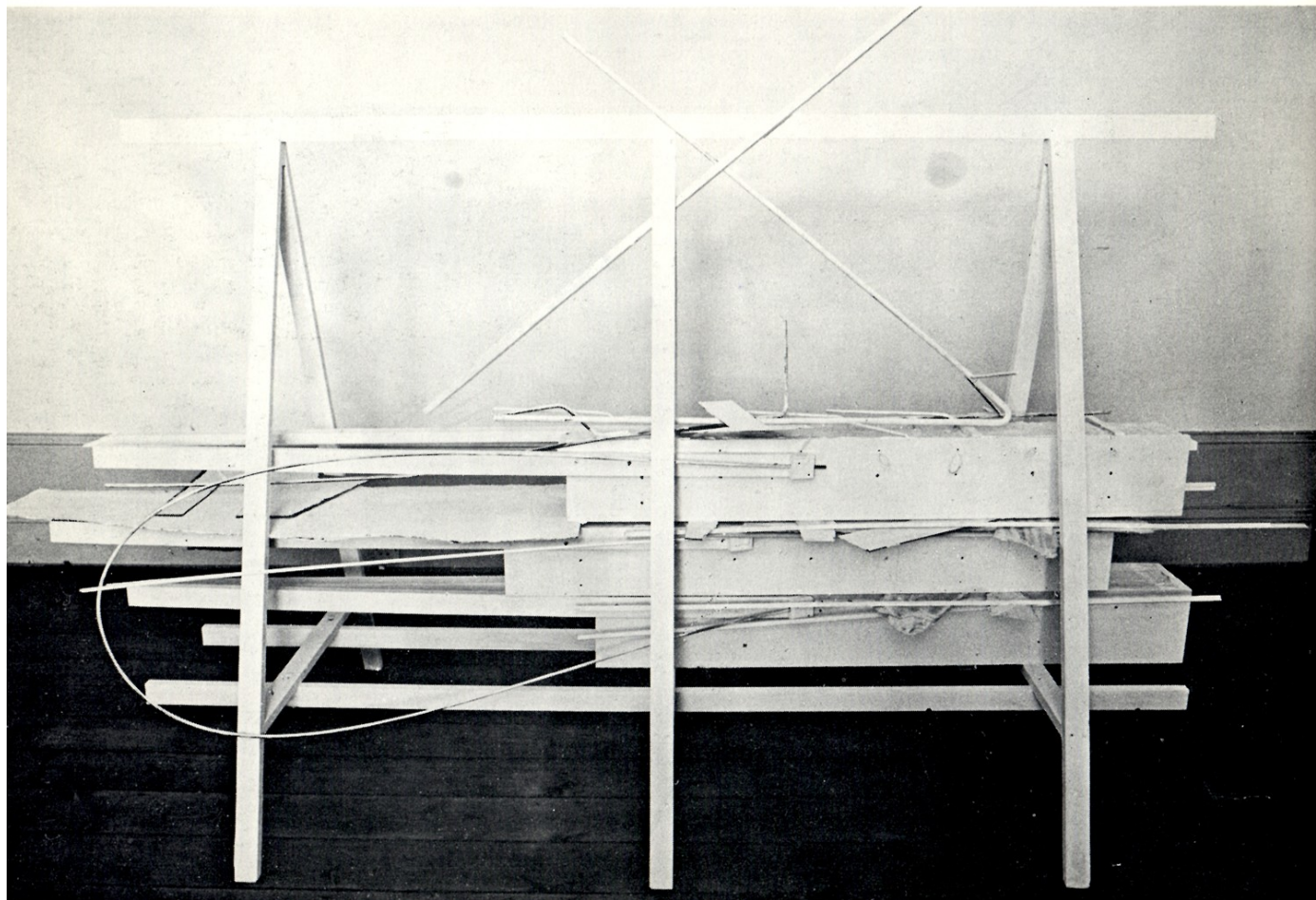
Detail

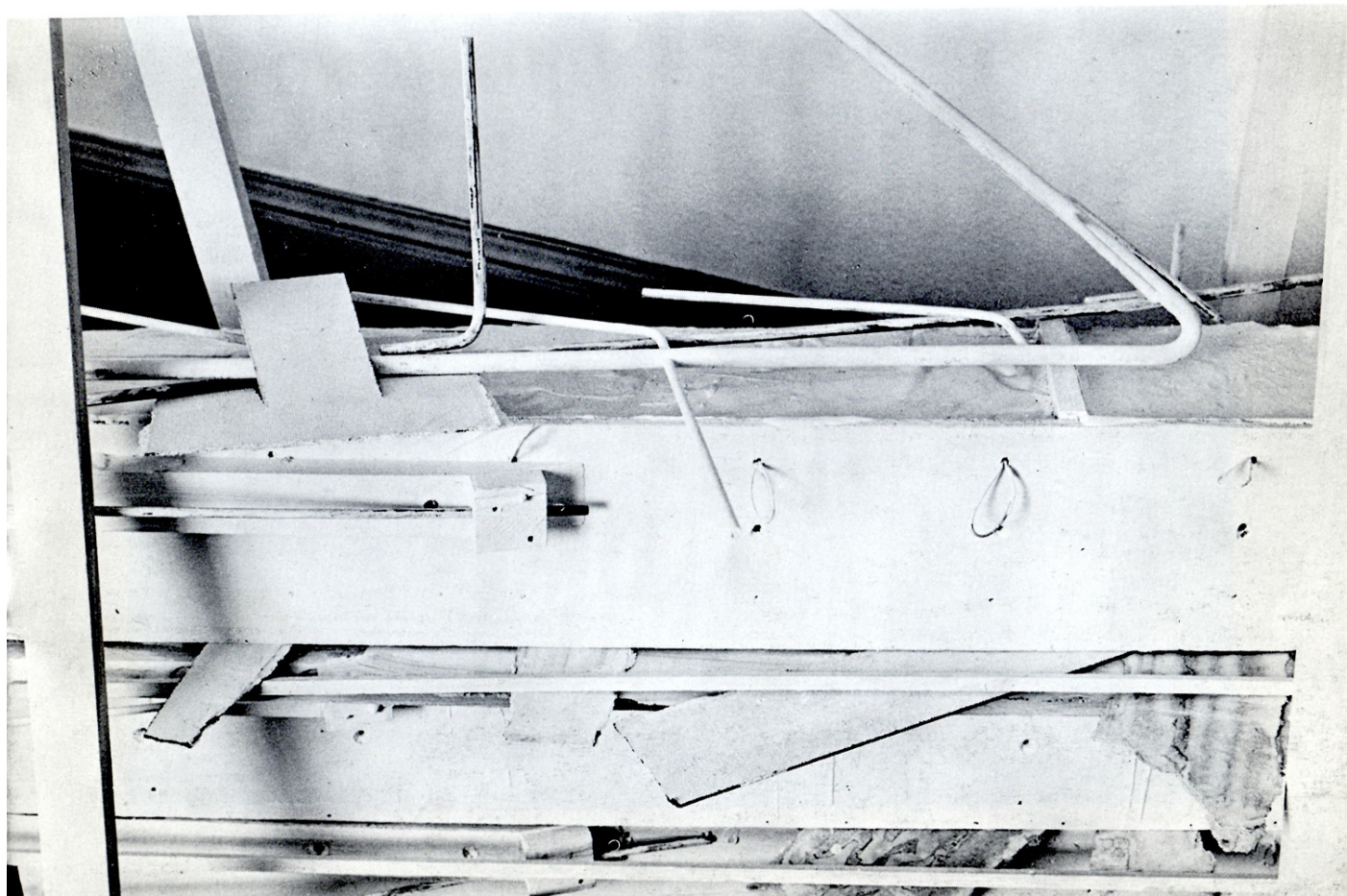


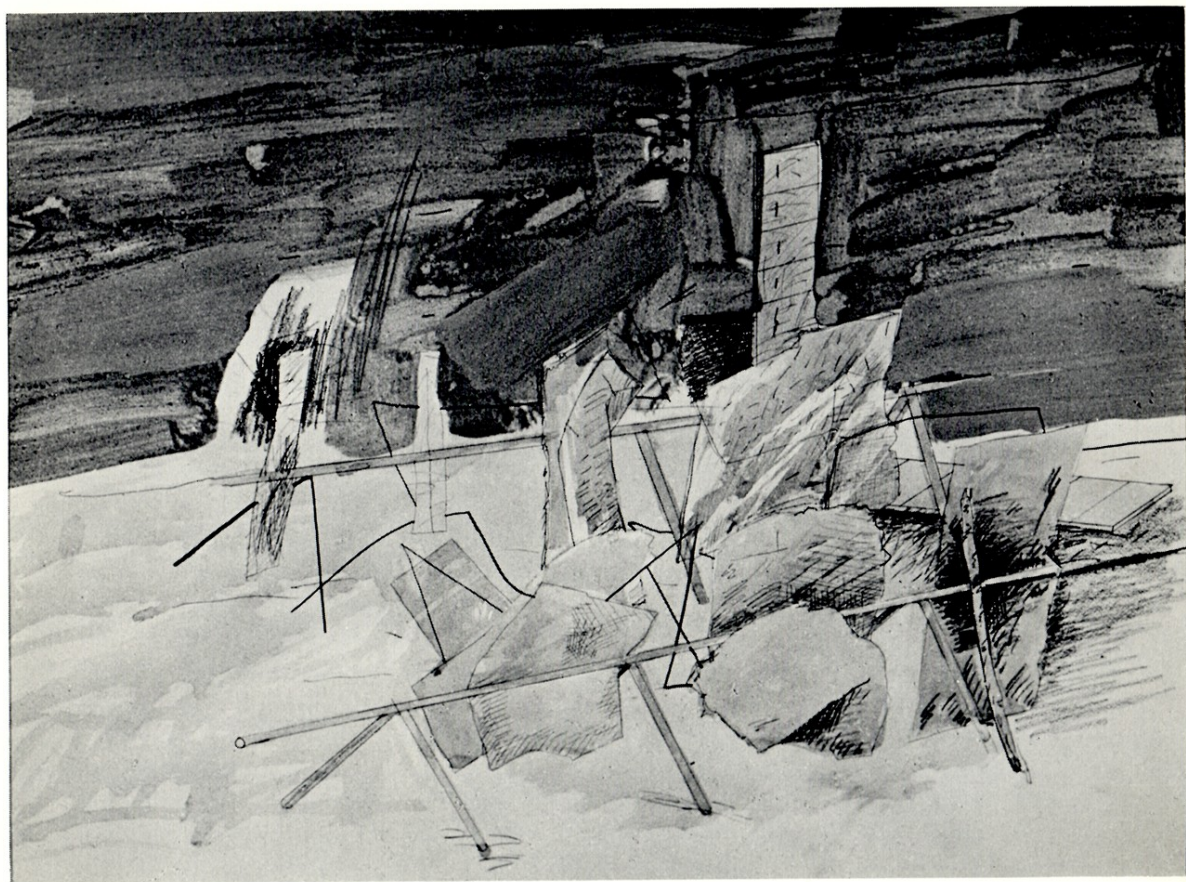
8 'Rack'

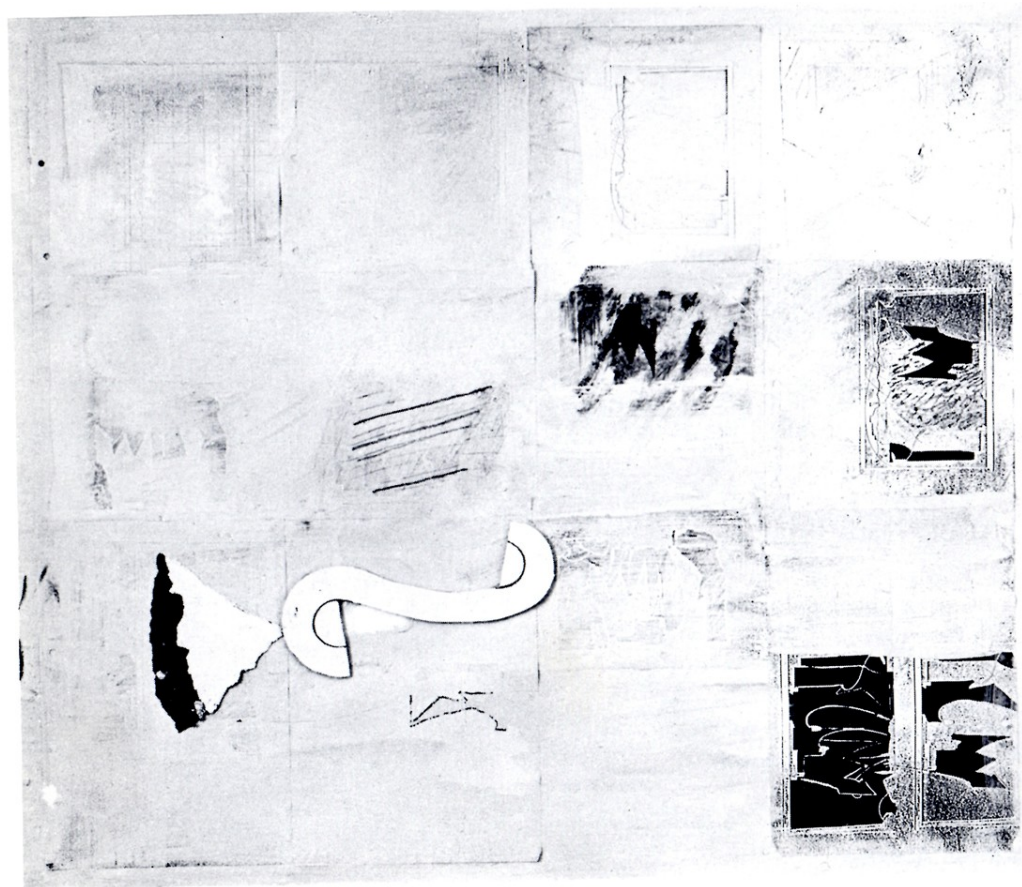












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