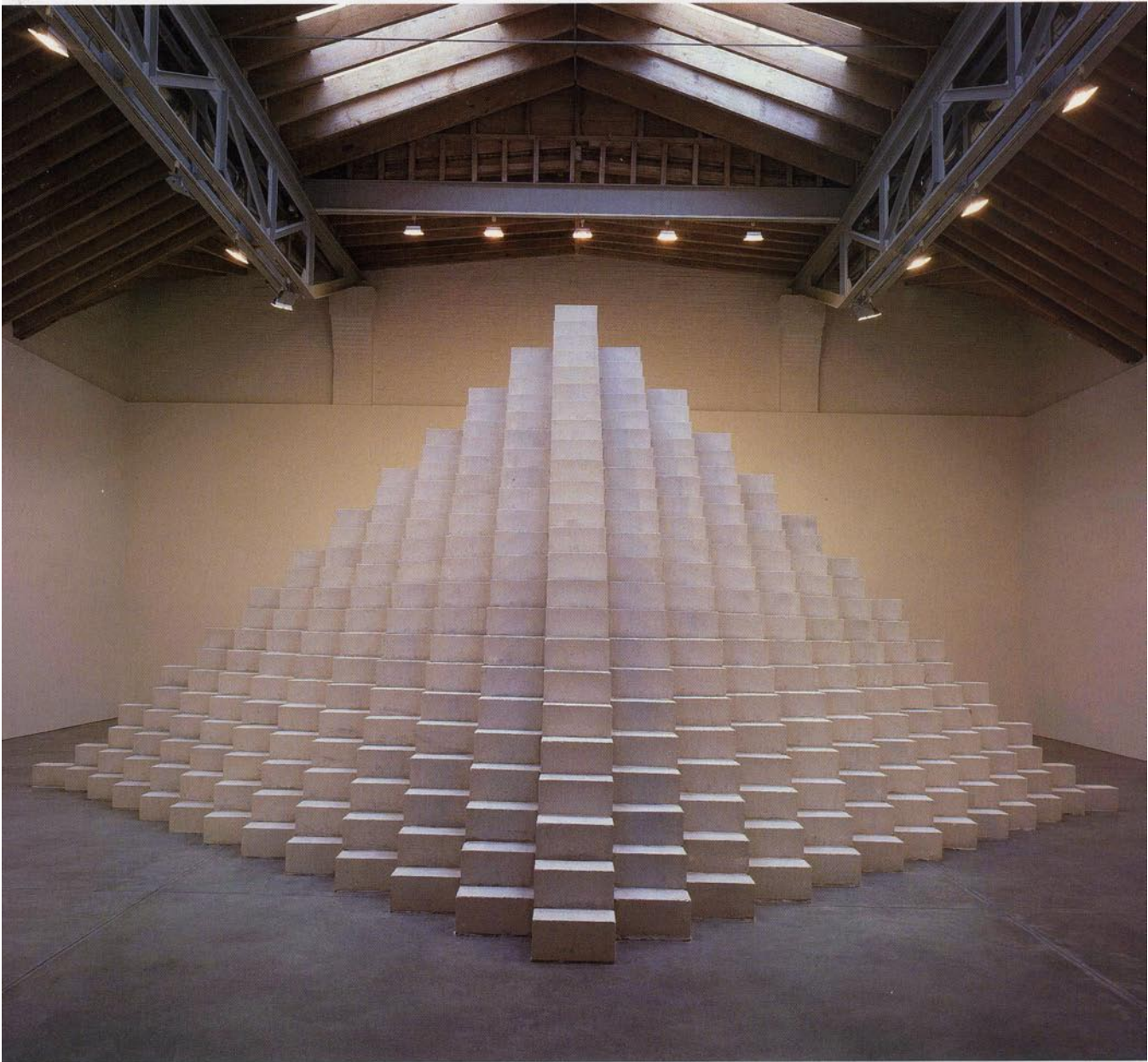


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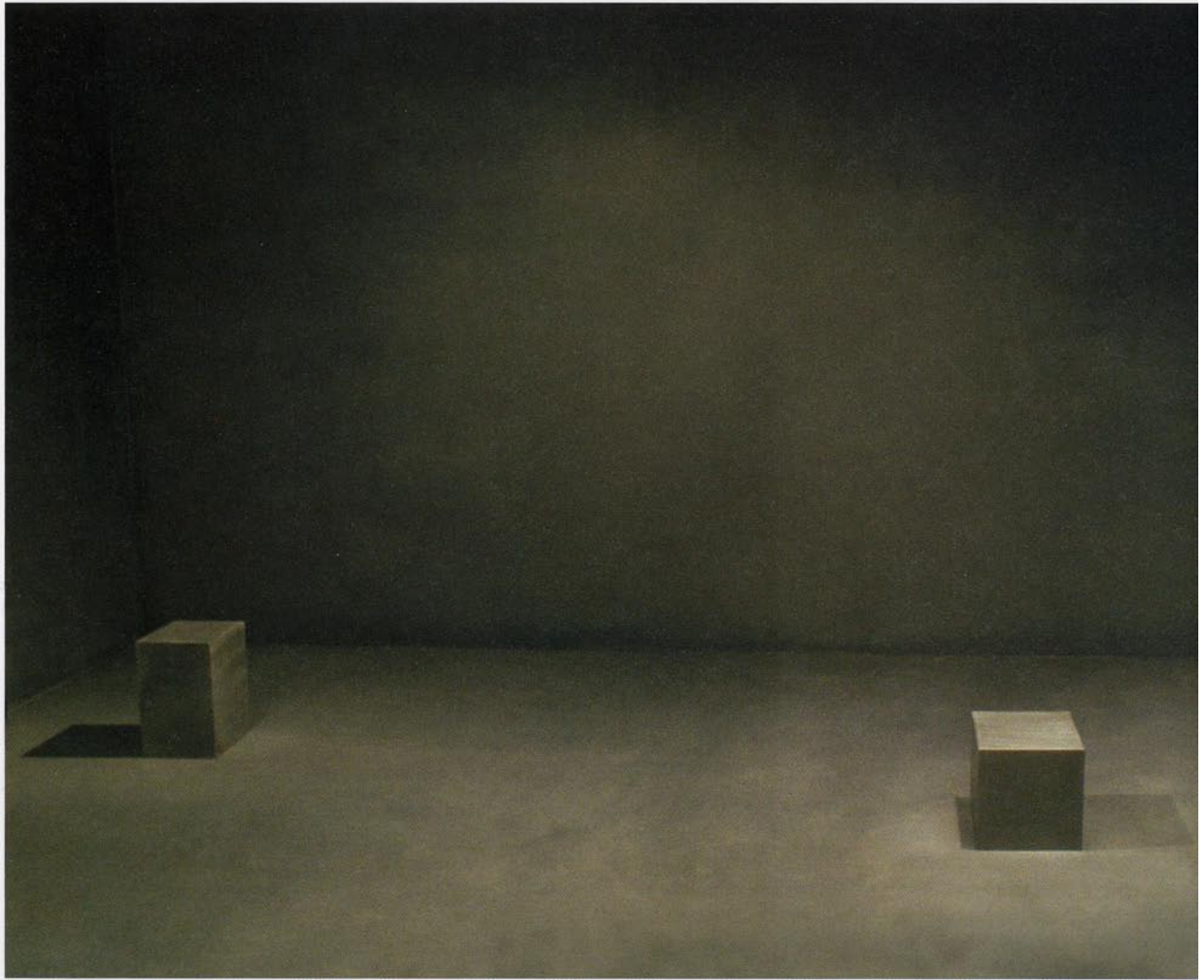
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Sol LeWitt

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Obsessed

BY KATHLEEN WHITNEY



Susan York, *Center of Gravity*, 2004.
Wallboard, graphite, and porcelain,
room 20 x 16 x 14 ft. View of installation
at the School of the Art Institute of
Chicago.

Obsession, no matter how manifested, is profoundly romantic and taboo. It strikes at the foundations of social values because it is compulsive and potentially without end. Obsession is the antithesis of repression in its public performance of excess. It violates every standard of behavior considered respectable, "normal," and responsible. Worse, it is a compulsion that refuses the very possibility of economy. Nothing could be further from the primary goals of contemporary techno-society than a profligate expenditure of energy out of proportion with its results.

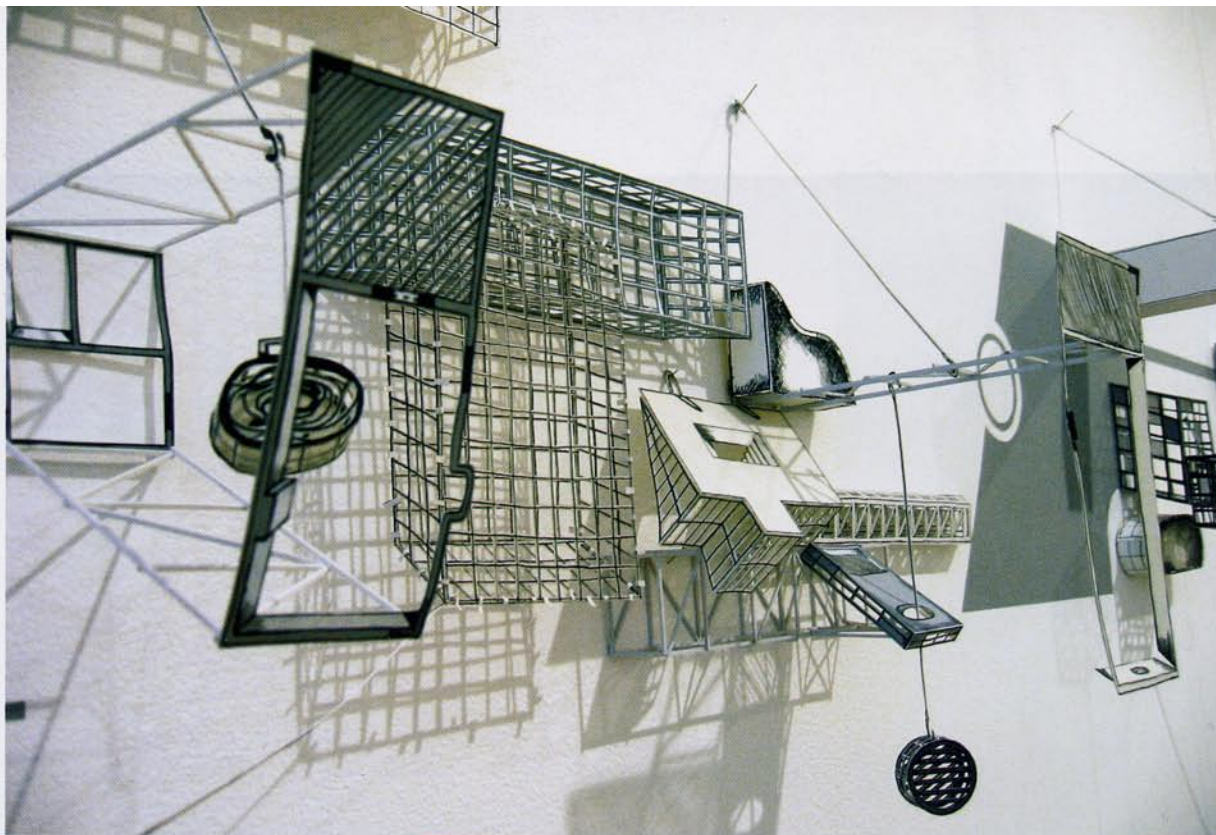
Honoré de Balzac's extraordinary 19th-century novella *The Unknown Masterpiece* is one of the supreme portrayals in literature of an obsessed artist. The protagonist is so driven by his notion of perfection that he has, without concern, been painting and un-painting the same woman on the same canvas for decades. In the penultimate scene of the novel, it becomes clear that the image-less canvas he presents to another character is complete for him, animated by a labor that successive re-paintings have, to other eyes, erased. The point is that the image and the labor remain visible to him.

This is a powerful metaphor for the ceaseless and invisible work (both manual and intellectual) that goes into every artistic endeavor. Yet what is seen as heroic, passionate engagement in one era is medicalized in the next. Balzac's Romantic image of the artist was revered throughout the 19th and much of the 20th century. Now, the word "obsession" has become part of a psychiatric diagnosis: OCD, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Love and art-making may be among the few remaining arenas where obsession is permitted and even encouraged. Counter-productivity may be art's most crucial remaining characteristic.

The word "obsessed" also describes a growing phenomenon in the visual arts, a trend that entails a total commitment to hyper-productivity. This sensibility has made its presence known throughout the range of current art media but is particularly evident in three-dimensional work. Although sculpture tends to be more labor-intensive than other media, this phenomenon goes beyond normal labor requirements and enters the realm of the hyper-intensive, emphasizing highly detailed and repetitive processes and fabrication methods. Although the work is extremely process-oriented, the process itself is without inflection: it doesn't relay an implied meaning or expression. The labor is almost robotic, neutral in tone—even the impression of human touch is not important. It is not concealed from the viewer and is not subsumed by the final visual impact. You see the work and in the same moment are struck by what was needed to create it: the labor is its point.

The process of making obsession-driven work is open-ended; there is no stopping point defined by logic, concept, or narrative. The decision to stop working has nothing to do with "finishing" or "culminating" in the conventional sense—stoppage is a random choice. The object, then, can be added to or subtracted from without visible effect. Shifts in scale won't alter the meaning or make a radical visual difference.

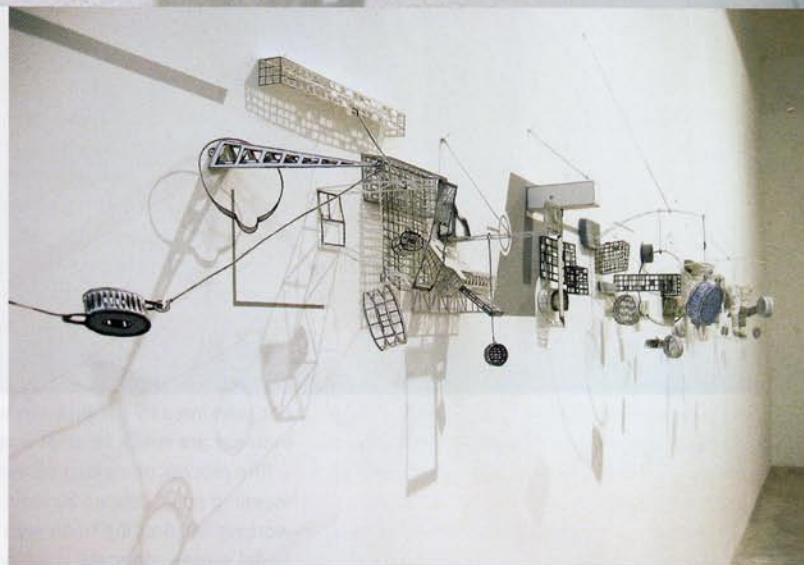
This kind of obsession-produced structure verges on the nihilistic because it proposes an object without fixed foundation. Without the Modernist convention of composition, there is no compelling reason to build one kind of structure rather than another. The obsessive aesthetic is irrational, it ignores the conventions of sculptural logic, taking the usual forms and materials and turning them inside out. The materials used are always identifiable and highly "materialistic": they don't meld into parts of a whole. Obsessive artists are not interested in transcendence; instead, they are involved with the dichotomy of the artificial and the natural, which requires that materials remain recognizable. Such artists use the physical practice of work to mirror repetitive,



obsessive ways of thinking or to duplicate specific patterns of thought and logic. Fabrication is effortful, fetishistic, given over to complexity and the interlock between concept and manifestation.

Multi-faceted and variegated, obsessive work is rarely decorative. While such objects could be considered beautiful, they often lose their attractiveness in the weight of their own detail. They are so oriented to the spectacle that they can't be easily contained within the realm of the aesthetic. If they are beautiful, it is in the same way as certain natural objects formed by accretion—webs, nests, coral reefs, and barnacles. Accretion is, in fact, the main fabrication method for this kind of work.

For the past few years, New York artist Jane South has been making odd installations and assemblages that require little more than an X-acto knife to come into being. Not composed in any conventional way, her wall-hung tableaux and tondi are assembled and accreted, one piece added to the next without a grand plan. They consist of cut, rolled, and folded pieces of paper that are glued, taped, or pinned together. Some of the forms are circular, square, or rectangular; some resemble



architectural fragments like trusses or catwalks. All of the surfaces are inflected in some way with colored marks, outlines, and crosshatchings. The individual pieces have the appearance of shelving units, hamster runs, cages, platforms, and tiny washing machine drums. Since they are positioned adjacent to each other, they also give the appearance of deliberation or purpose. South's craft (for lack of a better word) throughout these forms is fastidious and exquisite, almost off-putting in its perfection.

Contemporary culture has accustomed us to incomprehension. We all use a computer, an iPod, or a TV, but confronted with technological innards, most of us would never be able to identify parts or repair a break or malfunction. South's work is like a celebration of this incomprehension: we don't understand what we are looking at, but we love

Opposite, top and bottom: Jane South, *untitled (horizontal strip)*, 2004. Cut and folded paper, ink, acrylic, and balsa wood, 40 x 3.75 ft. This page, top and bottom: Art Gard, *Magnet Archaeology (Ruins of Temple Complex)*, 2003. Magnets, iron filings, canvas, and metal screens, 12 x 12 x 17 ft.

our amazement. Her work is truly inscrutable, mysterious, and nothing if not astonishing. Her compulsiveness is not off-putting; it is not the kind of uncomfortable, pitiable obsession we associate with psychosis. South somehow makes her obsession funny and visually intriguing enough that it becomes admirable. Her work walks a line between neurosis and clarity as the sheer amount of labor required to produce these things intrudes on your consciousness at every moment. The work's looniness makes it approachable, even inviting.

South's *Untitled* (2004) has the potential to be either shorter or longer than its exhibited length of 40 feet: its dimensions could change without affecting the final appearance. This piece has so many references to architecture, to building toys such as Lincoln Logs and Legos, to cranes and winches that it is almost a love letter to the sculptural vocabulary it mocks. South's work could be seen as a send-up of "ABC" art or of early Russian Modernist sculptors like the Stern brothers. Seen individually, each component is a Minimalist or early Modernist wonder. The work is carefully and dramatically lit, the resulting cast shadows emphasizing the delicacy of the structures and lending a dream-like quality always inherent in the miniature.

For the past decade, Art Gard (a.k.a. Don Lindblad) of San Antonio, Texas, has been making complex "drawings" and installations using small magnets and iron filings. Regarding his decision to use magnets, Art Gard has said, "The reasons to work with magnets, even thousands of them, are numerous. Low cost, good ecology, re-usability, no nailing, no glue, no welding, public response and public participation, all are real, not imagined, advantages." The choice of this material seems both anti-technological and quasi-scientific, like a boy's home science kit or an ant farm. While Art Gard's work relies on the phenomenon of magnetism, the sum of his configurations and architectural modifications is far more substantial than a mere physics demonstration. The work is so humorous, so gravity-defining and complex that the science-class nature of his materials becomes a secondary detail. Art Gard's work, like South's, is also unbelievably painstaking; many pieces entail the arranging of minute lines and clumps of magnetic dust. That he manages to make recognizable images out of iron filings is one of the most basic surprises. The identifiable nature of many of his images adds to the complexity of the total experience as well as to its oddness. This is truly a process deserving of Manny Farber's term for repetitive art-making, "termite art."

It is impossible to view Art Gard's work without being aware of the passage of time, impossible to see it without recognizing its ephemerality. The viewer knows that in the





Top and above: Suzanne Paquette, *Four Square*, 2000. Mixed media, sandstone, sand, humus, and limestone, 20 x 20 x 1 ft. Opposite: Susan York, *Center of Gravity*, 2004. Wallboard, graphite, and porcelain, room 20 x 16 x 14 ft.

end it will all go away, scraped off walls and pipes and beams and turned back to black dust in a box. The ultimate point of Art Gard's work is his desire to come up with a system. And central to this system is the requirement that the work only exist for a few weeks and then disappear. While grounded in the conceptual art of the '70s, Art Gard's work is far odder, idiosyncratically random, antisystematic, and tangential. Like the art of the Conceptualists, the work remains only in photographic form.

Art Gard's *Ruins of Temple Complex* covered several walls connected magnetically via a wide, sheet metal HVAC duct in the

roughly uniform slabs, she fills small boxes of varying sizes with earth, using the forms and a small wooden block to compress the dirt into somewhat solid chunks of earth in certain shapes and sizes. Paquette has developed a similarly low-tech way to introduce color into her installations. Red sandstone, limestone, and other crushed materials offer her a palette that can be both "subtle and rich of hue." In keeping with her labor-intensive techniques, these materials are ground and sieved and then used pure or in painstakingly mixed blends.

Paquette's installation *Four Square* is typical of her work. As she describes it, "*Four Square* is a square of squares." She thinks of the square as an earth symbol and chose the shape because it reflected the squareness of the room and its floor of square earthenware tiles. She used these pre-existing tiles to form the center square and to orient the rest of the installation, which used four different earth materials of four different colors: red sandstone, dark brown soil, yellow tan sand, and pale gray limestone. The square was divided diagonally into four quadrants aligned with the four cardinal points of direction. Each quadrant was distinguished by its own earth tone, and each contained

ceiling. The installation consisted of several painted sheets of magnetized metal with a linear pattern of iron filings on them. He also employed metal screen (for the illusion of transparency), sheet magnets, and bar magnets. The iron filings and magnets extended up the wall over the surface of the painting and onto the adjacent duct. The patterns and designs formed by the magnetic elements traveled down the duct to the opposite wall where they once again inched down the wall onto another set of "paintings." *Temple Complex* managed to be several things at once: an odd comment on contemporary institutional architecture and a sneaky disquisition on the nature of reality. Because of the way that Art Gard's work traverses an exhibition space, it manages to create an arena in which the image and the means necessary to make that image are of equal importance to the viewer. Hence the viewer shares in the artist's obsession and curiosity.

Another San Antonio installation artist, Suzanne Paquette, makes work whose form is determined by the architecture of the floor. Her construction methods are primitive: stacking, piling, and layering from a multitude of small elements. Her work is strongly related to Third World indigenous building practices, which rely on cheap materials and repetitive labor. The hundreds of elements that Paquette employs are made by hand using low-tech processes and raw earth. It is time-consuming, but as she notes: "It results in a certain pristine quality that creates an intriguing dichotomy when formed from such humble material as dirt." In order to produce



50 earth squares. The grid of squares consisted of eight-inch squares, each about 4.5 inches thick. Their tops were scored into four sectional parts. Paquette used a blend of ground hickory and the four different earth materials to lay a grid around each earth square. The grid, a fine line of sprinkled ground hickory, started at the outer edge of the piece following the grout line of the floor tiles. The stack of earth squares gradually grew thicker from its outside edge, forming a shallow upward slope, about a foot in height at the center. The slope ended as a wall around the center quadrant. The center section resembled a Native American sand painting. Paquette's work is generated by a nonlinear, yet strict logic resulting in a highly symbolic visual geometry, calling to mind the pre-scientific astrological diagrams made in many cultures in an attempt to explain planetary arrangements or extraterrestrial phenomena. Each of the spatial arrangements used in Paquette's floor installations is determined by a complex methodology.

Santa Fe artist Susan York's installations involve acting within a totally engaged spatial arena. Within her chosen space, she accentuates and then denies meaning or value to her own labor. Her process, which is nearly insane in the intensity of its labor, could be described as borderline masochistic. Unlike the labor of South, Art Gard, and Paquette, York's is only visible at close hand—even at normal viewing distance, the enormous quantity of her hand work is swallowed by its own repetition and the size of the room.

Although repetitive labor is the subtext of York's installations, its residue can only be sensed as a consequence of slight visual unevenness and other related imperfections. She describes the way she applies graphite to the walls of her room-scaled pieces as follows: "Repetition and labor are my benchmarks. I am transfixed by the constant circling of my hand across the graphite and the gradual silvering of the surface as my hand rubs across it again and again, hour after hour. In this way I completely transform and inhabit the room. While the physical action required by my work is intense, I am mesmerized by the movement of my body rocking back and forth as both of my arms circle as my hands rub the floor or the wall for hours that turn into days."

Her recent collaborative installation at the Art Institute of Chicago took well over a week to complete: she worked from early morning until night with student assistants. (York's collaborator was sound artist Steve Peters who was not involved with the visual arrangements.) *Center of Gravity* consisted of a graphite-covered room that contained five objects, four solid graphite forms (the rectangle calculated by the golden mean) and a porcelain stack on a sheet of graphite. York had the graphite machined into the shapes and then spent much time sanding them with progressively finer grits of sandpaper. Applying the graphite to the walls and the floor took only a few days, but polishing those surfaces took over a week of working from early morning into the night. York herself did the majority of the polishing because she found that the hands of her assistants made too many different marks: "There were personalities on the surface when I wanted the infinite anonymity of the graphite surface."

Viewers experienced this polished, gray environment in total isolation. The windows of the room were concealed and the space walled off, leaving a single opening. Only one viewer was allowed in at a time, and the door was kept closed in order to limit both the aural and the visual experience. Such a physically involving space creates an interplay of interiority and exteriority that heightens body awareness and accentuates certain fears, for instance of the dark and of enclosed spaces. York is aware that what ultimately makes her work succeed is the beauty of the perceptual effects in combination with the psychological charge created by the viewing situation.

The act of obsession, as manifested in the work of these four artists, creates its own kind of totalizing logic. Their installations bear the impression of an intense three-way relationship between how much the idea is thought about, how it comes to be developed, and the way it is made into a physical object. Because this process is written into the work, it is a direct and physical manifestation of process and idea. This is not work that can be jobbed out: there is little distance between concept and manifestation, and the intimacy of producer, idea, and material is crucial. It's often difficult, because of the nonlinear thinking and complex demands of fabrication, for any of these artists to use assistants regardless of the time-consuming and punishing nature of their processes. Like true obsessives, they cannot imagine simpler or more streamlined means to produce their effects.

Self-contained and organically complex, such works verge on the grotesque with the patent masochism of their manufacture. Yet the elaboration of detail is integral to their meaning and cannot be subtracted. The materials themselves are likewise essential: incredibly common, cheap, and prosaic, requiring relatively little skill to manipulate, they have a "home-made" as well as a hand-made look. The irregular and awkward replaces the slick and highly finished. For these artists, obsessive process generates highly personal and idiosyncratically intelligent outcomes.

Kathleen Whitney is a New Mexican sculptor and writer.