

DAVID NOLAN **NEW YORK**

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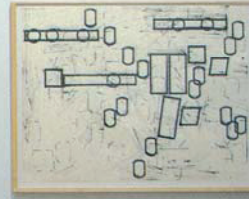
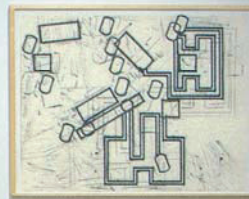
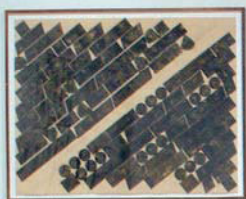
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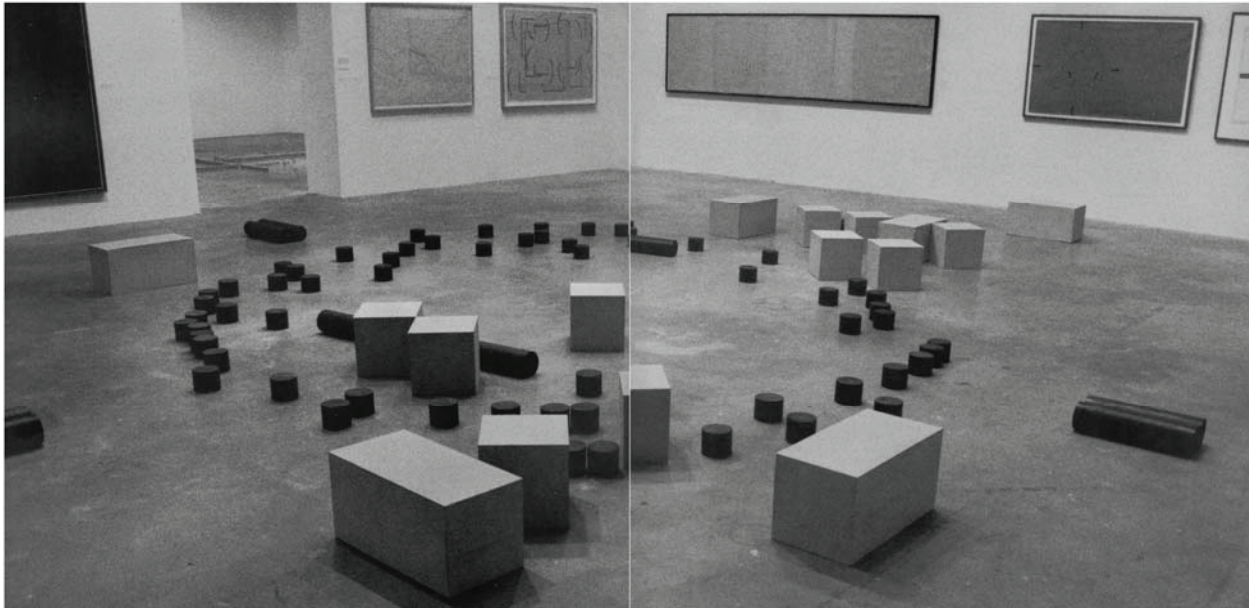
Art in America

MAY 2005



Barry Le Va "Faces in the Crowd" Charles Long
Robert Zakanitch Reports from Korea

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Reconfiguring Barry Le Va

Deceptively modest, occasionally violent, always challenging, the concept-driven oeuvre of Barry Le Va was fully considered in a four-decade retrospective at the Philadelphia ICA.

BY NANCY PRINCENTAL

134 May 2005

In an opening-day walk-through of the big, densely installed and (in both senses) stunning survey of his work at the ICA in Philadelphia, Barry Le Va offered this insight: “Ultimately it becomes a question of, can you tell the difference between order and disorder?” It’s a very good question. And like most Conceptualist-type puzzles, it suggests others: Is distinguishing order from its opposite a primary problem for Le Va or an ancillary one, tangent to concerns with symbolic content? Or, with respect to his famously sleuth-baiting work, is it altogether a red herring? And, not least, how much importance should we attach to what the artist says?

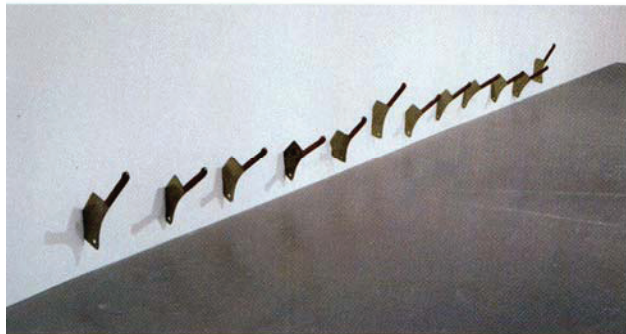
The last arises because Le Va’s work long seemed paradigmatic for a forceful challenge to any artist’s expressive priority. The celebrated November 1968 *Artforum* cover that launched his career showed nondescript little felt squares and ribbons strewn unevenly across a wooden floor. In other words,

seemingly uncreated work by an unknown artist from no place in particular (the 27-year-old Le Va was then living in Los Angeles). Diffident as dust and apparently as random as a toss of the dice, Le Va’s early floor exercises provoked abounding confusion. Robert Storr has written that in the mid-1960s, “Barry Le Va first made his mark with multi-media ‘scatter-pieces’ (a genre the artist more or less invented).”¹ On the other hand, Pamela M. Lee insists, in the current exhibition’s catalogue, that “Le Va was *never* a scatter artist. . . . Le Va’s process staunchly contravenes the associations of the arbitrary” (though, she says, Andre, Serra et al. embraced it).² For his part, Le Va

View of Barry Le Va’s Circular Network: Objects 1971, Area 1972, Activities 1973, 1971-73/1988/2005, wood and cast concrete. Photo Barry Le Va. Works this article were on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.



Felt: Placed, Folded and Compressed, 1966-67, felt, wood and Plexiglas, 10 elements, each 14% by 11% by 2 inches. Private collection, San Diego. Photo Cathy Carver.



Cleaved Wall, 1969-70, 12 meat cleavers, 30 feet long. Collection Rolf Rieke, loaned to Neues Museum, Nuremberg. Photo Aaron Iglar.

doesn't like the word scatter and says, moreover, "I hate the term anti-form"—which was also in circulation in the late 1960s—"because everything has form." "Distribution" is the word he prefers.³

Of course, perplexity is not an unintended outcome of Le Va's work, but a central motivation. Throughout, from the dispersals of iron oxide dust to placements of cast concrete, position has been contingent on site, matter and energy held in reciprocal flux. Scale is irremediably unstable since, absent fixed relationships (and even, in the beginning, solid objects), there are no fixed measures; the perspective of the very small is no less compelling than the macrocosmic. The work is addressed to base physicality, but its medium and, perhaps, its message are unimpeachably abstract. Another question Le Va says the work presses is, "How could one deal with what sculpture does to the physical body of the viewer, without making an object?"⁴ As Storr says, "Indeterminacy of this kind induces anxiety, and expresses it."⁵

The ICA show opens with very early work indeed, including Le Va's final student project, completed in 1967. This incremental series, pieces of gray felt that are at first vigorously crumpled and ultimately quite tidy, is presented boxed in Plexiglas and hung on the wall. It was meant to be placed on the floor, but, famously, that proposal didn't fly with Le Va's teachers in the MFA program at Otis Art Institute. One wonders if the gray-flannel-suit sensibility to which the final unit in the series inclines is his implicit target.

Among the early works on paper is a grid of 20 photographs of poppy seeds manipulated—partly with the edge of a stiff paper card—into furrowed fields and voided geometric shapes; they could be enormous tracts seen from the air, or the tiny iron filings moved around by magnets in a chil-

dren's toy. Puffs of chalk dust are represented by cloudlets of white spray paint in one drawing on graph paper from the late 1960s, clusters of ball bearings by precisely drawn little circles of ink in another. A caseful of purely conceptual work—notations for hypothetical projects, excerpts from Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes mysteries, a list of "Fictions" including "Matter in the center of the galaxy is either collapsing or being rearranged on a grand scale"—marks the furthest point Le Va reached in the dematerialization of the object.

But if his work was, from the outset, physically insubstantial, ephemeral, decentered and ambiguous, it was hardly emotionally prostrate. The death of personal expression was not achieved by the artists of the '60s without some degree of belligerence (how could it be otherwise?). In Le Va's work, formal intransigence was soon transformed into outright aggression. Knives were thrown, guns fired, bunkers built. That vector is highlighted in the ICA exhibition and, especially, its catalogue, which encourage a politicizing, or re-politicizing, of the physical threat associated with Le Va's output and perhaps, by extension, with other Minimalist and Conceptualist work of the late 1960s and early '70s, such as that of Vito Acconci, Chris Burden and Dennis Oppenheim. The violence is identified not just with sculpture and performances that involve instruments or acts of assault, but also with the resistance to order itself.

This may be a historically accurate correction. The struggle against the power of institutions and the conventions they upheld, inside the art world as well as out, was anything but peaceful in the 1960s. Note, for example (as Rhea Anastas does in her catalogue essay), Robert Morris's remark, full of frustration and rage—and these comments are about the embrace of new art, not hostility to it—in his landmark 1969 essay "Notes on Sculpture": "At the present time the culture is engaged in the hostile and deadly act of immediate acceptance of all new perceptual art moves, absorbing through institutional recognition every art act."⁶ In the passage preceding that one, Morris refers to the aggression in the work itself; he writes of the new art concerned with perceptual fields rather than discrete form, "What is revealed is that art itself is an activity of change, of disorientation and shift, of violent discontinuity and mutability, of the willingness for confusion even in the service of discovering new perceptual modes."⁷ Ingrid Schaffner, the ICA exhibition's curator, writes in her catalogue essay, "As we go more deeply into our investigation of Barry Le Va's art, we will encounter such violence again and again."⁸ Le Va's own response is, "I never found those pieces violent. I see them that way only in retrospect. At the time, I thought of them as impossible tasks."⁹

The key pieces for this discussion include the bone-rattling *Impact Run—Energy Drain*, a sound recording of Le Va running between opposing walls and hurling himself against each before pausing and returning, and returning again, repeatedly, for an hour and a half. Its original presentation was in 1969 at Ohio State University, in the gallery where the run had taken place; viewers reported traces of sweat and blood on the wall. A slightly altered version of this piece was enacted, recorded and presented the following year at the La Jolla Museum of Art. As Le Va sees it, *Impact Run* is, in essence, an investigation of acoustics in space; it became a grueling endurance test because he didn't know when to stop, so kept going until he couldn't move. Indeed, he says, he was concerned "to do it in the most clinical way possible. I thought of it as research."¹⁰ At the ICA, there is only the sound (re-mixed from the first installation) of running feet, a heavy impact, a pause and the same again, at slowly lengthening intervals (accounted for by the "energy drain" of the title). Thunderously amplified, the pounding steps are the ominous background music for the entire exhibition, but when experienced at closest range—the two speakers involved are installed at opposite ends of a narrow ramp between the ICA's upper and lower galleries—are powerful enough to seem nearly tactile. "Hitting a wall" is something that happens to runners, of course, as it does to other athletes, and, more to the point, to artists, a metaphor for any psychological or physical block so established it has become nearly literal. Indeed, much of the language of Le Va's work hovers between symbol and fact, a confusion that has deepened as his career has progressed. Looking back from this later work helps illuminate the antinomy present from the start.

One exceptionally violent work was never meant to be materialized at all: a 1969 proposal calls for a double glass barrier to an open door, with instructions for running through it, shattering the panes and retracing one's steps over the broken glass. Significantly, it's not clear whether the designated runner is meant to be the artist or the viewer. And sometimes, the harm suffered falls to buildings rather than bodies, as in *Shots from the End of a Glass Line* (1969-70/2005). This work's threaded metal pipe, snaky line of shattered glass and five little holes in the wall require an explanatory text to reveal that the holes resulted from gunshots, the gunman having aimed at the open end of the pipe projecting from the wall, standing at the farthest point of the line of glass. On the other hand, *Cleaved Wall*, from a series initiated in 1970, is altogether transparent: at the ICA, it involves a dozen meat cleavers thrown underhand into the wall, landing, in stride-long intervals, at ankle height.

In the mid-1970s, Robert Pincus-Witten wrote about Le Va's works of this sort that while they were "clearly . . . marked by an aggressive tone—the hammer blows, or the physicality of pitching," the aggression was of an essentially expressionist order, and betrayed Le Va's connections to the gestural painters of the '50s: "this oblique quality of danger, I think, is still ultimately linked to Le Va's primary psychological painterliness," Pincus-Witten concluded.¹¹ By contrast, Marcia Tucker, who with James Monte included a version of *Cleaved Wall* in a 1969 Whitney Museum exhibition (Le Va's first in New York), was convinced of that work's essential emotional neutrality, writing in the show's catalogue that even if it was "extremely theatrical in its final form . . . its intentions were of a logical order," having a closer connection to physical logic "than to violence per se." Schaffner, naturally, sees "exactly the opposite."¹²

In some work of the later '60s, danger is present only implicitly. *Continuous and Related Activities: Discontinued by the Act of Dropping* (1967/1990) involves dozens of yards of wine-dark felt, some left in neatly rolled bolts, much snipped and slivered, heaped into cresting waves or tossed about like flotsam, the whole surmounted with several sheets of shattered glass. The margins of this installation are menacingly indeterminate;

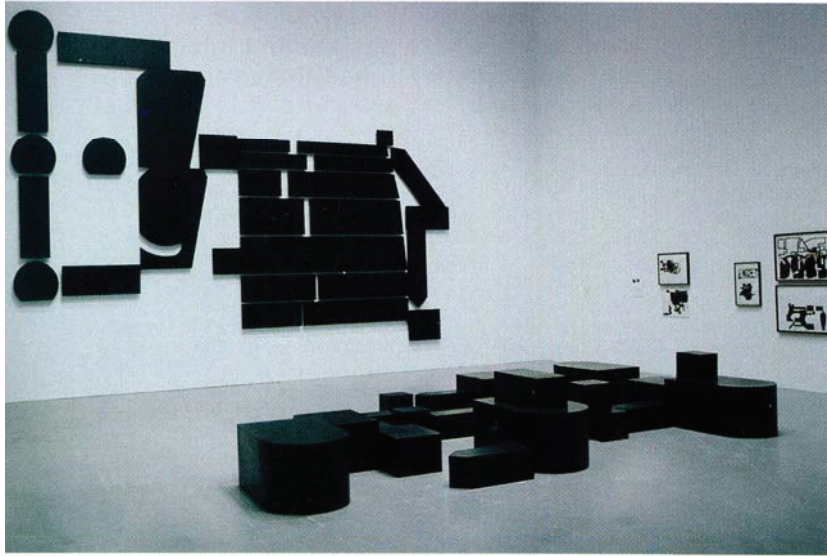
Much of the language of Le Va's work hovers between symbol and fact. The confusion has deepened as his career has progressed.

shards, splinters and dust—small fragments of glass trail outward all around. Similarly, *On Corner—on Edge—on Center Shatter* (within the Series of *Layered Pattern Acts*), 1968-71/2005 calls for placing a sheet of glass on the floor, smashing it with a 10-pound sledgehammer, putting another sheet on top and repeating the process up to 20 times; a final sheet of glass is left intact. If the danger here was only slightly less than overt, by the middle 1970s Le Va's work had become, on the face of it, downright pacific. *Accumulated Vision* (1977/2005), which Le Va himself calls "almost too complicated to talk about,"¹³ represents, in obstinately illegible shorthand, an imaginary network of sightlines penetrating the space of the gallery. What we see is attenuated in the extreme: a scant assortment of cleanly crafted wooden strips and cylinders, placed on the floor and all four walls. And if this work's only apparent violence is to simple geometry—a seeming right angle that is subtly acute, for instance—it is possible to find aggression here too: against architecture, logic, sanity itself: "Violating our trust as viewers," Schaffner writes, "was just part of the plan."¹⁴

A *Accumulated Vision* marked the culmination of a trend toward material refinement. By the 1980s, the work put on considerable mass, even obtuseness. The new bulk reflected early training. Le Va had studied drafting and architectural drawing in high school and during his first year of college; his approach toward drawing had been shaped by the techniques (for instance, ink on graph paper or vellum) of architectural rendering, and by its orientations. (Generally he chose the overhead plan rather than the street-level elevation, and occasionally in the '70s the third-dimension-projecting axonometric.) Starting in the '80s,

View of *Accumulated Vision: Series II, 1977/2005, wood*. Photo Barry Le Va.





View of 9g—Wagner, 2005, polyester resin and rubber-coated MDF, 34 feet wide.
Photo Barry Le Va.

The pieces of a plan are never fixed, physically or symbolically. For Le Va, every installation, every metaphoric attribution is provisional.

architectural form became an increasingly explicit part of the sculptural vocabulary as well. In the “Bunker Coagulations” of the next decade, big, blunt forms, including cylinders, elongated boxes and gently double-curved plinths, cast in dense black neoprene and hydrastone, hunkered down in tight configurations. The one at the ICA, *Bunker Coagulation (Pushed from the Right)*, 1995/2005, features dozens of cylinders corralled by big disks and boxes, the whole flanked by two forms shaped like the double-lobed stone tablets of biblical lore.

As their title suggests, these installations draw on the defensive military structures of World War II, but as Le Va made clear in a public lecture at the ICA, there are other sources as well.¹⁵ He was hospitalized with cancer in 1971, had open-heart surgery in 1985 and continues to have health problems, and he talks about the work of the 1980s and '90s in relation to the furniture, instruments and procedures of medicine, and hospitals in particular. Thus, he said, the cylinders can be read as examining- or waiting-room stools, and, by extension, stand for the people who occupy them. Open linear shapes are the contours of nurses' stations, curved forms the sine waves of various organ-function monitors. But just when it seemed that Le Va was for once offering a master key to his code, he edged, in his explanation, toward a kind of black humor that threw the whole decoding into question. And then, in the uncertainty that the humor engendered, back to the emotions of serious illness—bewilderment, helplessness, anger.

The “Bunker Coagulations” have myriad kinships, with the generic metropolises of Matt Mullican and Paul Noble's letter-shaped dystopic architecture, with the supercool analyses of contemporary urban structures in Rita McBride's sculptures and Sarah Morris's paintings. The difference in Le Va is that the pieces of the plan are never fixed, physically or symbolically. Every installation, every metaphoric attribution is provisional. This is true as well of the work on paper, though there, nameable associations beckon more tempt-

ingly. Le Va says he's not interested in drawings as images; early on, they were merely plans and records, while more recently they have tended to be built, he says, like sculpture.

Most of the works on paper are, indeed, constructed from layers of cut shapes that are drawn from the solid forms and relational circuitry of the three-dimensional work. But as they have grown in variety and elegance over the last 15 years or so, the drawings have become suspiciously playful, lush, even discursive. This is true as early as the 1973 drawing *Walking Stick*, the delightfully dry, hopping lines of which relate to an installation involving walking a stick end-over-end through a gallery, but also evoke the insect of the same name, the more so as the marks are inscribed on pale green paper. Splats of bright red ink behind the geometries of two untitled drawings of 1997 look a lot like blood; the loopy lines and star-shaped nodes of a 2000 drawing suggest neurons. These are uncharacteristically small drawings and unusual, too, in their invitation to literal reading. But many of the bigger, more densely layered works on paper testify to acknowledged influences as varied as the visionary Oyvind Fahlström and the puzzle-piecing Jess; in their graphic license and energy, they have affinities, too, with work as disparate as that of cyber-formalist Terry Winters and Carroll Dunham, whose mobilizations of cartoon-based mayhem connect to

Le Va's work on several levels (including a fleeting early interest in comics). And not a few of Le Va's recent drawings are downright epic in scale and symbolic reach. Indeed, early references to improvisational jazz have been joined, on paper and in other media, by allusions to Wagnerian opera.

The new work commissioned by the ICA for this exhibition, *9g—Wagner* (2005), is colossal: the wall-hung elements, made of rubber-coated MDF, measure an overall 34 by 24 feet, and almost as much square footage is occupied on the floor. Big, blocky and simple, the polyester resin floor forms include halved lozenges, pointy-sided rectangular boxes and cubes, sometimes stacked or partially slid one into the other. The forms on the wall are slightly more svelte and even simpler, mainly rectangles and segments of circle. Their arrangement strongly suggests a letter-based code or arcane punctuation marks; the heavier elements on the floor seem more architectural. But here too, Le Va has proposed surprisingly narrative associations—in fact, he relates these shapes and their proportions to body parts, pointing out torsos, heads and limbs. Or, connections can be drawn, he says, to an archeological dig. Or, to architecture, or to bar graphs. It would not be wrong to make analogies with musical scores. The very title celebrates ambiguity: *9g* refers to a portion of the wall component that can be read as either the number or the letter. In any case, the floor elements will be differently configured the next time they're shown. Of the wall installation, Le Va says, inimitably, “It is absolute at this point.”¹⁶

Pincus-Witten observed in 1977 that “despite the almost instantaneous (and perhaps transient) awareness of his work of the late 1960s . . . Le Va's career, of all the figures with whom he can be associated (Serra, Benglis, Keith Sonnier, et al.), remains one neither crowned by financial success nor illuminated by critical discussion.”¹⁷ In a smart and funny article written almost three decades later, Carroll Dunham offered a complementary assessment: “Following Le Va's conceptual pathways, in fact, yields only dead ends and blank walls—not larger networks of thought. This opacity, a fundamental darkness, has been increasingly foregrounded in the work as its physical presence has grown dramatically over the last 40 years. The odd and remarkable thing is that, during this time, Le Va's obscurity has risen to the level of content.”¹⁸ In other words, Le Va's work remains hard to embrace, a difficulty that is not a byproduct, and in fact not a simple quality

at all, but an active inclination. And perhaps it doesn't define the work so much as a relationship between artist and viewer.

This relationship appears to have changed considerably since the 1960s, when (among sympathetic viewers) an artist's insistence that viewing involved hard work was submitted to without complaint. Some 40 years later, art that is too resistant to easily penetrate is seen—even by fans—as suggesting an attitude. Thus, being difficult is now considered (at least on the evidence of recent writing) an act of aggression. There is something a little admonitory—even, perhaps, retaliatory—about such a response. But it also opens up meaning that does seem waiting to be seen, illuminating, for instance, some dark corners in La Va's output.

On the other hand, it can be said that meaning is simply not assured in Le Va's work, and that *that* is what constitutes its most lasting provocation. We all want art to cohere, to make sense. Even after it's been smashed to smithereens, we want to find some order in the million little pieces left littered on the floor. Le Va walks us right into the chaos and lets us see what it looks like up close, where coherence seems at hand, but he's not making any promises. □

1. Robert Storr, *A Survey of Drawings 1966-2003 & Two New Sculptures*. Vienna, Galerie Judin, 2003, p. 11. In Storr's reading, Richard Serra, Robert Morris and Carl Andre followed suit.
2. Pamela M. Lee, "The Archaeology of Scatter/The Logic of the Clue," *Accumulated Vision, Barry Le Va*, Philadelphia, Institute of Contemporary Art, 2005, p. 24.
3. Public remarks by the artist at the exhibition's opening, Jan. 14, 2005.

4. Quoted in Marcia Tucker, "Barry Le Va: Work from 1966-1978," *Barry Le Va: Four Consecutive Installations & Drawings 1966-1978*, New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1978, p. 6.

5. Storr, p. 13.

6. Rhea Anastas, "The Reconstructive Process: Barry Le Va, 1968-1975," *Accumulated Vision*, p. 49.

7. Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 4: Beyond Objects," *Artforum*, April 1968, reprinted in Richard Armstrong and Richard Marshall, *The New Sculpture 1965-75: Between Geometry and Gesture*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990, p. 185.

8. Ingrid Schaffner, "Accumulated Vision and Violence, Barry Le Va," *Accumulated Vision*, p. 56.

9. Conversation with the artist, Mar. 20, 2005.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Robert Pincus-Witten, "Barry Le Va: The Invisibility of Content," *Postminimalism*, New York, Out of London Press, 1977, p. 125.

12. Quoted in Schaffner, p. 68.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

15. Barry Le Va, lecture at the Philadelphia ICA, Mar. 17, 2005.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Pincus-Witten, p. 119.

18. Carroll Dunham, "Black Whole: The Art of Barry Le Va," *Artforum*, March 2005, p. 207.

"*Accumulated Vision: Barry Le Va*" was on view at the Philadelphia ICA, Jan. 13-Apr. 4. The show was accompanied by a 256-page illustrated catalogue with essays by exhibition curator Ingrid Schaffner and other contributors.

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View of Continuous and Related Activities; Discontinued by the Act of Dropping, 1967/1990, felt and glass. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo Cathy Carver.

