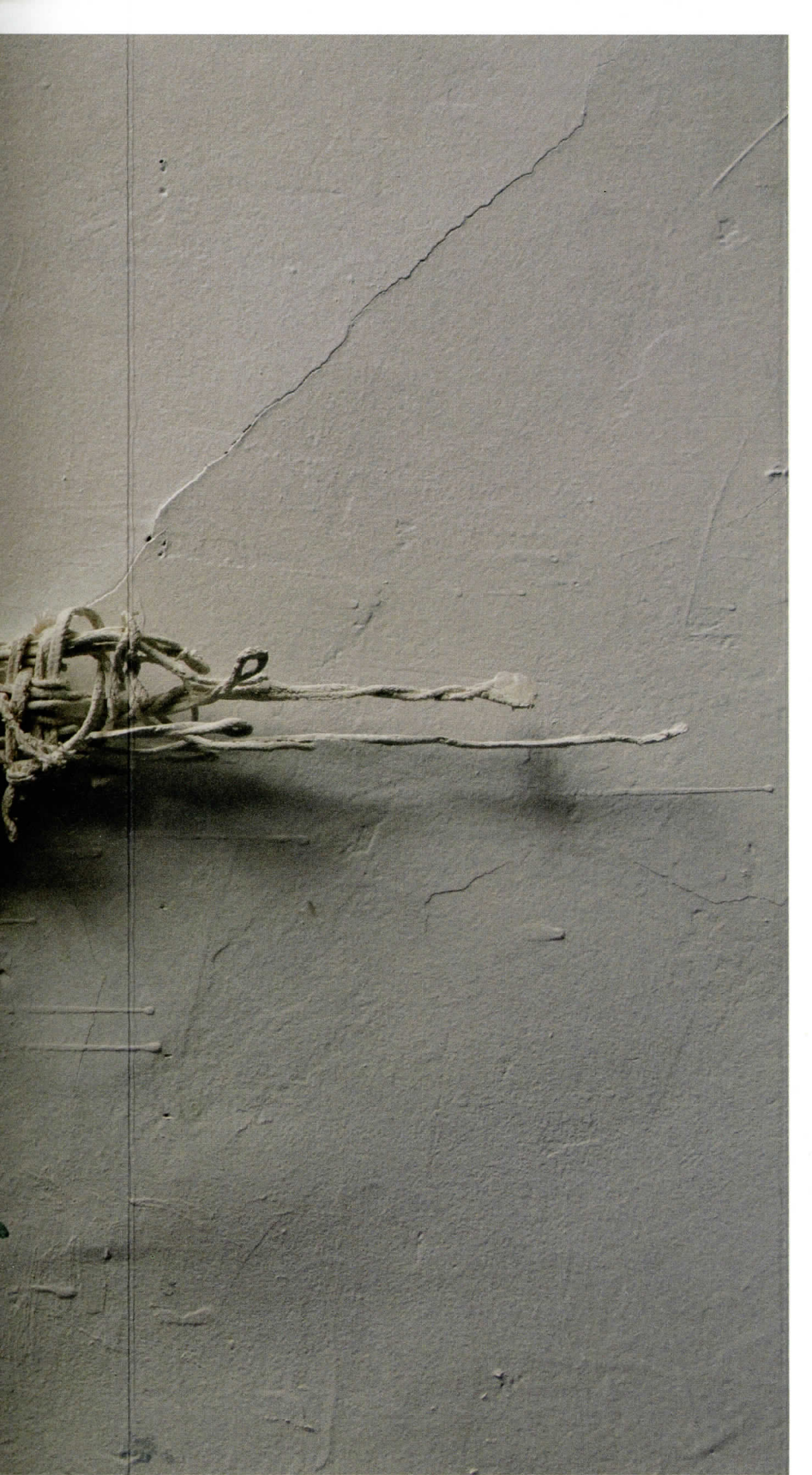


IF ORGANIZING IS THE ANSWER,
WHAT'S THE QUESTION?

C R I S T Ó B A L L E H Y T



Set of Strings in knots, 2008



Shinny Pyrrhic Victories

(On Cristobal Lehyt's *If Organizing is the Answer, What's the Question?*)

If someone can rest assured of the robustness of our logical system, and perhaps even find shelter in the dreadful paradoxes that unravel when one tries to go against its most basic principles, that someone has to be Cristóbal Lehyt—whose artistic proposals have always been based on teasing out a number of the most illustrious of logical aporias one can think of. Indeed, if there is one defining trait in Lehyt's body of work (which he has developed for just over ten years), it is his consistent proclivity for inconsistencies, which he has managed to exploit without getting trapped in circular, self-defeating syllogisms.

Consider the predicament that he has led himself into this time, and that we are about to witness in this show: after spending a couple of years of residency at this institution and having the possibility of addressing any aspect of this diverse, grandiloquent university, he chose to concentrate precisely on the impossibility of processing all the information coming his way in a meaningful way¹. In brief, the show he prepared while at residency at this illustrious house of knowledge is precisely about the impossibility of acquiring it.

I guess one should have expected such a daring (anti) proposal from Lehyt, whose (com)pulsion for staging almost impossible situations is already well known despite his short career.

Take his 2006 show in his hometown of Santiago de Chile entitled "El Mar de Bolivia" (Bolivian Sea) in which he not only aimed to address, head on, the difficult history and the continuous tension between his natal Chile and neighboring Bolivia—the latter lost its coastal territory to Chile, in a war in the 1870s—but, most significantly, it was another one of his attempts to address an impossibility: trying to evoke and render that which does not, actually, exist.

And though no one is able to refer to such sea because, alas, it doesn't exist, Lehyt was able to craft out of this exercise in futility a tenuous yet successful landscape, forged only through connotation—achieved solely through the associations carried by the materials (their texture, especially) he used in the installation. Thus, he managed to produce in the viewers, with a simple gesture—the suspension of a thin and rusty pipeline at the center of a gallery, whose walls were completely covered with thermal insulating paper—the faint sensation that they were witnessing the emergence of a fragile horizon at the very center of a claustrophobic space. If Bolivia's boxed-in territory was suggested by the meticulously enclosed gallery space, the suspended pipeline was the most effective allusion to a coastal line: its rust inevitably evoked water, and its functional qualities (a conduit) evoked the natural resources (oil, natural gas) that Bolivia has always claimed it could export, if it ever had access to the Pacific coast.

Nonetheless, to set up an artistic project in the treacherous waters of non-existent oceans, is not only a risky business but, most importantly, an onerous one: to make it, one needs to sacrifice almost everything in the attempt. Lehyt happens to like those waters, and takes on the challenge, fully conscious that even if he is able to swim ashore, he might still end up collapsing on the beach.

To embark upon such an enterprise implies, for an artist, to be reduced to a bare minimum of expressive resources, because the possibility of direct reference to the object(s) in question is denied from the onset. With almost the whole expressive arsenal out of reach from the onset, the only trick left in deck of cards is the good old self-reflexive one: to transform the quest—the struggle to represent—into the subject of the piece itself. In other words: with direct reference off the table, the only story left to tell is the one about the impossibility of telling.

What one can actually tell, however, is that underneath their precarious, muted appearances, one needs to see Lehyt's process as part of an illustrious tradition that, in Latin America (as most modernist formulas did) acquired its most definite version in the literary musings of Jorge Luis Borges. More precisely, in the masterful opening paragraphs of some of his most enduring stories, in which the narrator acknowledges from the start that he is unfit to tell the story he is about to refer to.

Under the notable influence of Chesterton (contriver and embellisher of elegant mysteries) and the palace counselor Leibniz (inventor of the pre-established harmony), in my idle afternoons I have imagined this story plot, which I shall perhaps write someday and which already justifies me somehow. Details, rectifications, adjustments are lacking; there are zones of the story not yet revealed to me; today, January 3rd, 1944, I seem to see it as follows [...] ⁱⁱ

Nonetheless, if Borges's proclivity for preciseness began by making transparent to the reader the exact application of the formula, the opposite can be said of Lehyt, whose process is at best opaque in the sunniest of days at his studio.

In fact, one can be assured that things are not that easy with Lehyt, because they have not been easy for him either. The first one to blame for the hard times is, of course, Borges.

The fact that it became the favorite maneuver of the late modernist arsenal to the point of ending the characterization of the alleged "crisis of representation" of late modernity so paradigmatically that it is almost self-defeating—becomes a contentious issue to wrestle instead of a tradition to find comfort in. Ultimately, after almost a whole century of overuse, it hardly constitutes a surprise at all. How much "more barer" (!) can one get after Beckett's plays, Carver's short stories or the one-two factorization process undertaken on the artistic object led by minimalism and conceptualism in the 1960s and 1970s in the realm of the visual arts?

For that reason, Lehyt's hand is, by all means, more rigorously (i.e. more desperately) reduced a new bare minimum: the only trick left is not really available because it is, alas, cliché. So, how to proceed from here? Or, more pointedly: What drives Lehyt to corner himself in such a way? Why would an artist start out in such disadvantageous position?

One should not despair though, because if there is something we can be sure of—and Lehyt's work seems to be there, to remind us of this—it's that there are always new lows. And this shouldn't be

taken as a negative assessment on his work; much on the contrary, it needs to be seen as the ultimate recognition of Lehyt's capacity to point out the exuberance of even the most barren of deserts.

One can contend that this evident mastery with the noticeably slippery and sharp Occam razor stems, in Lehyt's case, from the fact that his predilection for the impoverishment of its expressive resources is not just a recurrent trait, but rather the most crucial aspect of his artistic practice. It is, without a doubt, a central feature apparent to not only the most noted critics of Lehyt work but, most importantly, to the artist himself—whose hyper-consciousness of his own process allows him to theorize about itⁱⁱⁱ. Thus, explaining the seminal anecdote behind one of his latest show, Lehyt reveals how this process of "reduction" is at the center of the installation:

Reduced to Insults [the title of his show] is meant to conjure up the idea of being reduced or left with very little after being defeated but still wanting to put up a fight, even if its ironic or desperate since one knows it will have no real effect [...] I was thinking about the position artists have because we too are reduced to insults...what one would want art to do —effect tangible, social change—it doesn't. But still, this sense of incompleteness can be production^{iv}.

Two significant things, I believe, can be concluded from this seemingly innocuous anecdote. The first one is that whether due to injury or insult (or both), Lehyt starts from the same place—trying to pick himself up from the ground—because all his work is, precisely, about the struggle itself. The second one is that his conviction in the "productivity of incompleteness" reveals an artist with a strong belief in the persistence of selfhood against almost any odd. Selfhood might look empty, but it is never vacant.

And it is precisely this belief in the perseverance of selfhood which is at the base of Lehyt's artistic practice: if he didn't believe in its endurance, he wouldn't situate his artistic practice either at the moment immediately after or immediately before the alleged complete demise of communicative possibilities. In that sense, his work not only "thematizes" but inhabits the space prior to the final demise of expressiveness. Lehyt's work is in itself the penultimate landscape (as one of his shows in Santiago de Chile was aptly entitled), which signals that we might be close, but never at the very bottom of the barrel in this process of expressive elimination.

This might be a minimal distance, but it is a critical one, as it marks the distance between (final) self-defeat and the emergence of a dimmed, fragile process of reconstitution of the self. In fact, if there is a reward to be found in these pyrrhic victories at the core of his artistic practice, it might not only be the possibility of shining a light on this darkest of processes but also to display the traces of this tortuous journey as art.

What—if not the shiny display of traces (residual or seminal) of this process of elimination/restoration—constitutes the centerpiece of the show he has prepared during his residency at Harvard University?

And is it only when we are able to understand that these amorphous objects (creatures?)—which resist any identification and which are treated either as jewels or as the most delicate of specimens (arranged over a velvety surface, and displayed inside a tightly closed, oversized container)—can be both, the last remnants of the once booming textile industry in Massachusetts and the (latent) fragments of selfhood which resist to dissolve into nothingness, that we can start appreciating the project he has prepared for Harvard. In it, Lehyt has managed to make the theme of his research conducted at the university coincide with his unique, relentless questioning of the communicative process: the process of “elimination” that has led to the demise of the textile industry in the state (and with it, the seeming collapse of all its workers unions), mirrors the very core process he has pursued in his research and artistic process for the show. Going (literally) from riches to rags, and beyond, we are left with the same residual debris—both precious in its latency, but scary and sad in its material condition. Sure enough, things can redevelop from there, but at this stage they are so bare, fragile and crude that it doesn’t feel quite right.

Achieving this slight discomfort in the viewer is the proof that Lehyt’s pieces are starting to succeed. It is for this reason that Lehyt’s works are the strangest of flowers: they depend on the most adverse conditions to flourish. Oppositional by nature, they require serious problems of communication to blossom—Lehyt needs to fight something and where there is no adversary to be found, he will pick one up, starting with the expectations of his spectator.

Thus, his well-known proclivity for producing work that would go (directly) against the expectations of his viewers needs to be understood, first and foremost, as a tactical move (i.e. the trigger that will unravel the eliminative/restorative process) and not as the final intention of his pieces. Anything different will effectively reduce him to an artist only reactive to context, and too driven on contingencies and stereotypes.

His practice needs to start by playing with the expectations that are created surrounding his shows and residencies—or what he assumes might be expected of him in the different places he has been requested to exhibit—because what he is really after is the communicational process promised in a show, in art. In this particular show, such a conscious boycott of the communicational act promised in art, begins, one may contend, in the title of the show.

It is not that the gesture of appropriating a question first posed by Elaine Bernard in one of her articles, and making it the title of the show is, by itself, a de-stabilizing move—and hopefully a vexed homage of Steve Allen’s memorable Question Man routine^{vi}. What makes it particularly poignant is the fact that it is a question that beckons a question as its answer.

This peculiarity of the question itself does not mean that it is voided of meaning—either tautological or circular in its structure. Just as the installation in itself, the question might be onerous to answer, and pyrrhic in its pursuit, but it is not self-defeating, nor empty of content. Lehyt’s own labor pains reside in making this critical distance apparent, to laboriously craft a space one step prior, one step after, meaning vanishes forever.

What is tricky, uniquely tricky I would venture, with Lehyt is that he forges the penultimate space by appealing to a temporal device. When Julia Bryan Wilson ends her insightful essay on Lehyt's penultimate show by asking "The penultimate is the not yet, the almost, the next to last. If there is no future, what comes after, now? What will be the final scene?"^{vii}, she is already providing us with the answer: by claiming a "penultimate" stage (spatial/temporal), Lehyt necessarily infuses the work with a sense of imminence and, therefore, of possibility. That is to say: by appealing to the alleged immediate antecedent of the final stage of a process, one ends up guaranteeing that it will never come to an end. The penultimate guarantees that something, somehow, at some moment, will come next.

Ultimately, Lehyt's work seems to suggest, one time after the other, that imminence is the ultimate savior of its ultimate demise. Bend down a bit in the gallery, look inside the box; you will see a collection of these onerous trophies still lingering around.

José Luis Falconi
Harvard University

i Cristóbal Lehyt's project for the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University formally started in the summer 2008. During the whole 2008-2009 academic year Lehyt made monthly visits to the Labor and Worklife Program at the Harvard Law School, where he conducted his research under the coordination of Dr. John Trumbour, the Research Director of the Center, and which culminated after a month long residency on campus during the summer of 2009.

ii Jorge Luis Borges, "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," (1944) in *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964), p. 72.

iii In an interview for the accompanying catalogue to a 2007 exhibition at Praxis Gallery, in New York City, curator Gabriela Rangel points out this feature of Lehyt's work as part of one of her questions to the artist: "Looking at the images that you appropriate, thinking about their legibility, the red and white artist books sprinkled with hermetic, impenetrable images, they seem to be images that resist a public reading, even though they're extracted from the public realm. You work with material that is produced and reproduced by the media, topical, journalistic images... stereotypes. In overlying an almost laboratory-like treatment upon these images, you suppress their public potential, that which makes them commonplace, to draw them outward." "Cristóbal Lehyt" in Gabriela Rangel, and others, eds. in *Three Artists/Three Curators* (New York: Praxis Gallery, 2007), p. 14.

Similarly, the curator of the show "Reduced to Insults" (2007) Juli Carson, stresses this particular quality of Lehyt's production when reviewing his work for the show: "Lehyt thus stages a series of reduced "situations" that promise a connection between the subject of art and the real world in-as-much as they solicit a failed connection between the two." Juli Carson, "Cristóbal Lehyt's Reduced to Insults" in *Room Gallery Exhibit Brochure*, (Irvine, CA: University of California at Irvine, October 2007), p. 3.

Echoing these two insights, fellow artist Sharon Hayes has also marked this aspect of Lehyt's work as central when discussing his show *El Penúltimo Paisaje*, exhibited in Santiago in 2009: "I think there is something in these works that you use often in your work that does refuse a kind of reading. For me, your works have a boundary or an outline or a frame around them that announces them to both be and not be what they appear to be." Sharon Hayes and Cristóbal Lehyt, "Conversación/Conversation" in Cristóbal Lehyt, ed., *El Penúltimo Paisaje*. (Santiago de Chile: Fundación Telefónica, 2009), p. 94-95.

iv Juli Carson, "Cristóbal Lehyt's Reduced to Insults" in *Room Gallery Exhibit Brochure*, (Irvine, CA: University of California at Irvine, October 2007), p. 4.

v For a direct explanation by the artist on the importance of playing with the potential viewers' expectations see the interview conducted by Rodrigo Canala, *Cristóbal Lehyt: 31 esculturas y 6 preguntas* (Santiago de Chile: Galería Die Ecke, 2010) and the roundtable discussion he engaged in with fellow Chilean artists Felipe Mujica and Johanna Unzueta, *Sunset from the Empire State Building*. (Vienna: SeZession Wichtelgasse,

vi The passage that Lehyt lifts from Elaine Bernard is a subtitle of her article entitled "The State of U.S. Labor & Building Union Power" which appeared in *Democratic Left* (New York: Fall 2008, Vol. XXXVI, N. 2, p. 4-6).

vii Julia Bryan-Wilson, "562 (Where California Meets Chile)" in Cristóbal Lehyt, ed., *El Penúltimo Paisaje*. (Santiago de Chile: Fundación Telefónica, 2009), p. 112.

An exhibition organized by
**THE LATINO AND LATIN
AMERICAN ART FORUM**

David Rockefeller Center
for Latin American Studies
Harvard University

Curated by José Luis Falconi

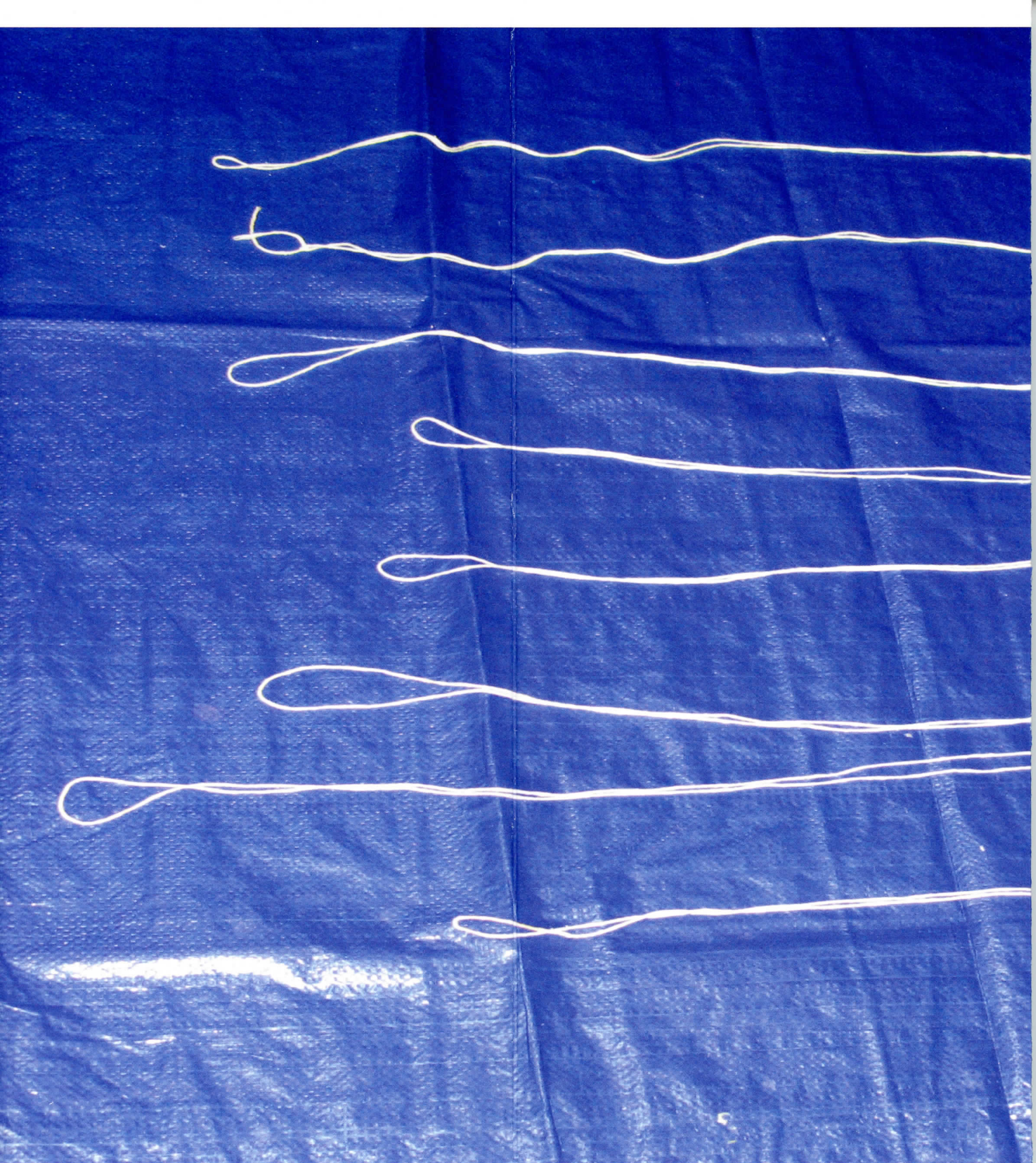
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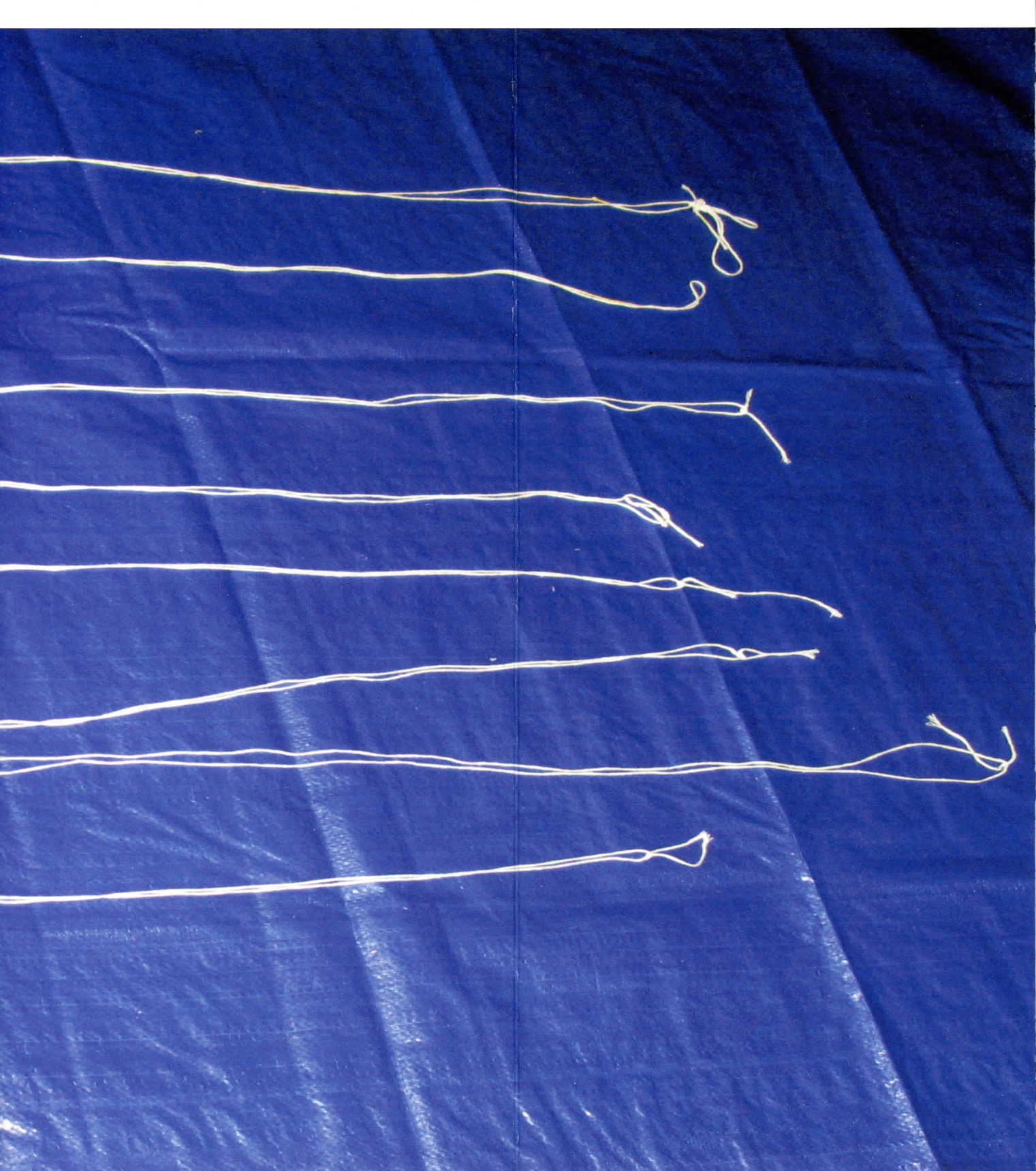
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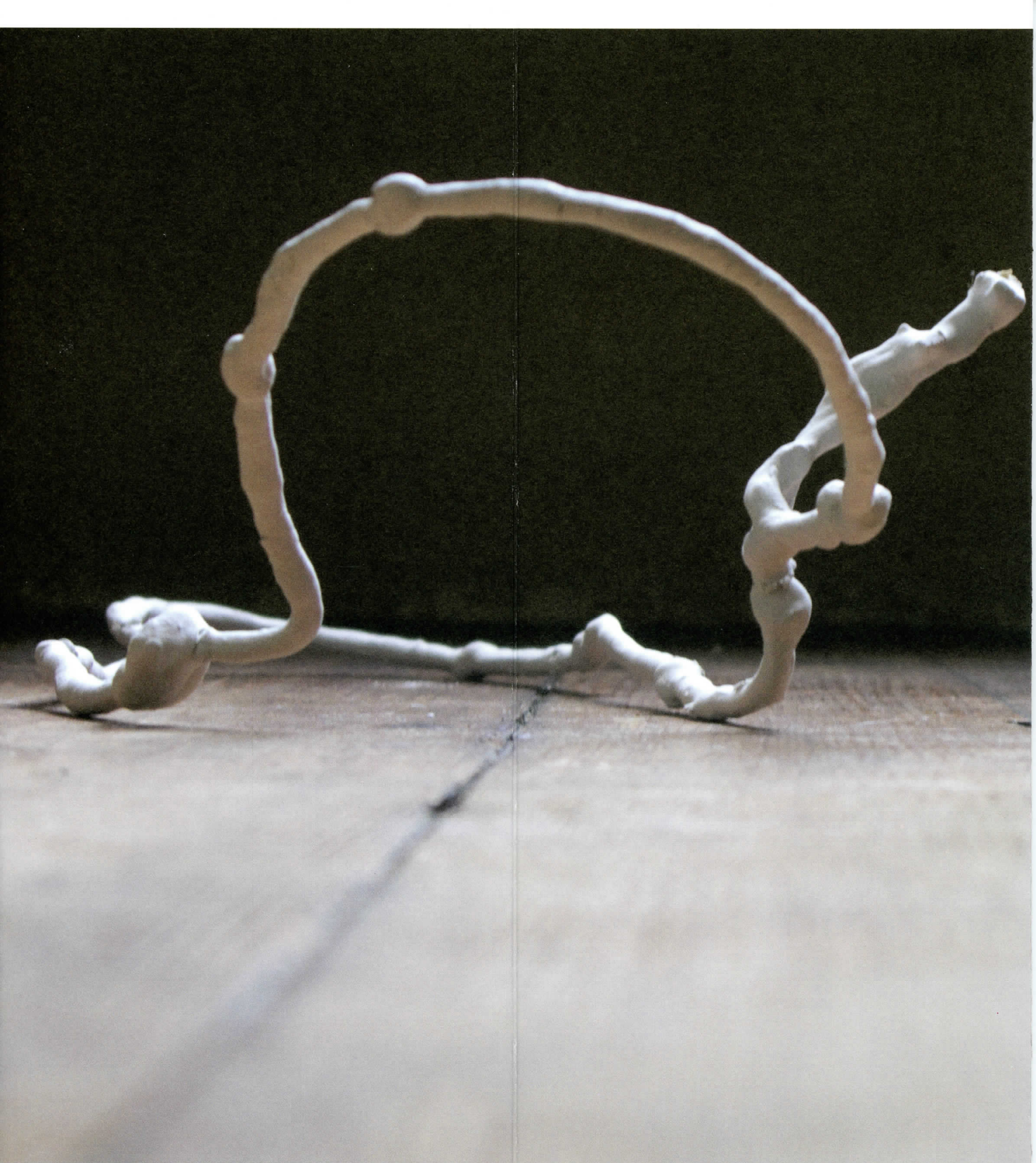
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This exhibition is made possible by
the generous support of the
Gustavo Brillembourg Memorial Fund
and The Estrellita Brodsky Fund.



Strings on Floor, 2009





Sculpture 45 - Cambridge, 2009