

ELEANORE MIKUS

SHADOWS OF THE REAL



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ROBERT HOBBS and JUDITH BERNSTOCK

With a Foreword by THOMAS W. LEAVITT

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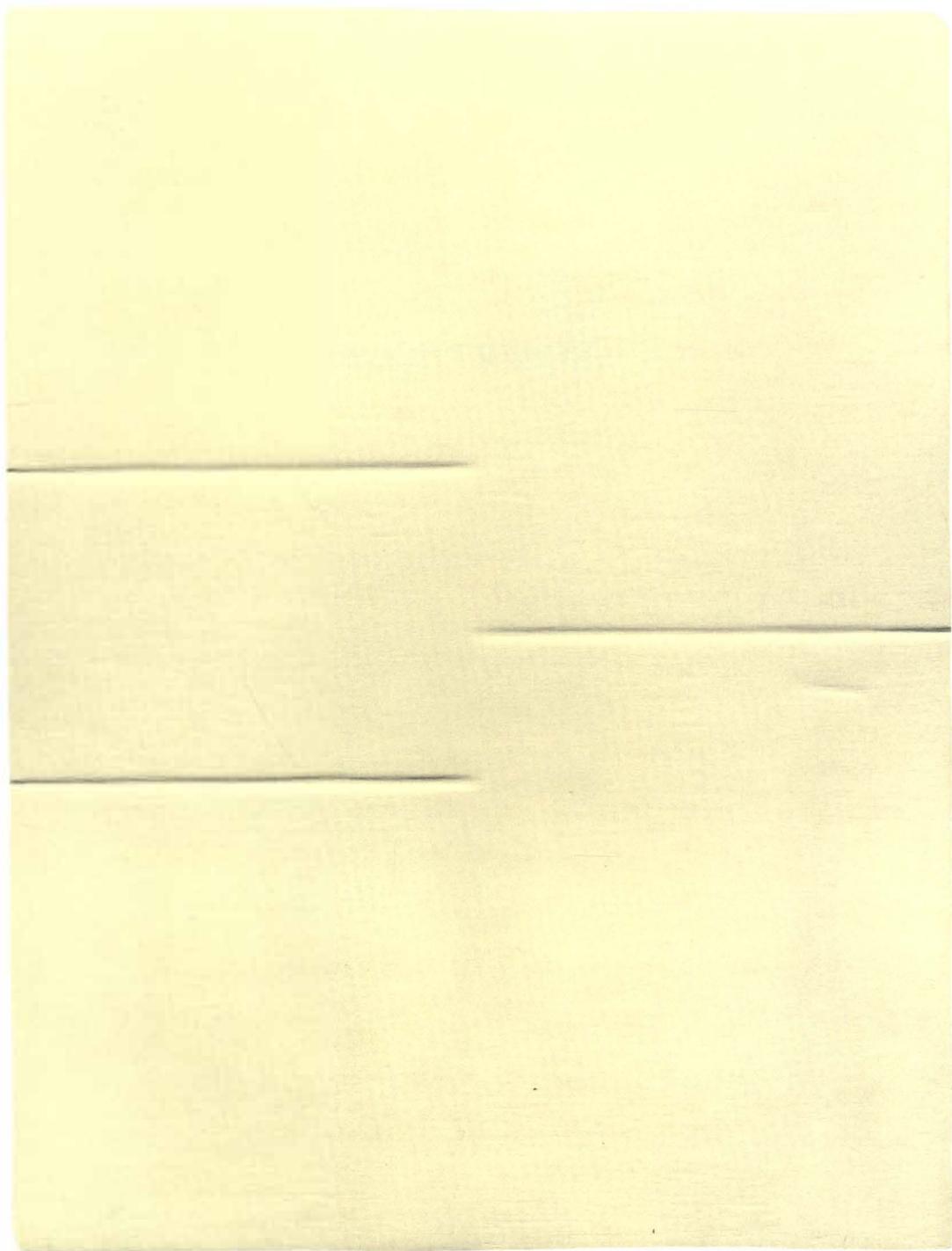
FRONTISPIECE
Eleanore Mikus, 1969 (photo by Shepard Mallen)

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ELEANORE MIKUS
SHADOWS OF THE REAL

ROBERT HOBBS



Tablet 15, 1962
Acrylic on wood
16 × 12 inches

IN HIS BOOK *Populuxe* Thomas Hine describes the widespread prosperity in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s that enabled mass-consumer taste to indulge in cars with massive tail fins, TV dinners, and Barbie dolls.¹ It was a gaudy age of middle-class opulence, when design ideas were applied to everyday objects to increase their desirability and marketability, when planned obsolescence became the norm, and when quantity clearly outweighed the virtues of quality. Given the sheer profusion of new products, the wealth of applied decoration, and the mania for new decorator colors that included, in cars and appliances, such novel two-tone combinations as turquoise and taupe, charcoal and coral, and canary and lime, it is no wonder that committed young artists in the late fifties and early sixties were repulsed by the excesses of the “Populuxe era” and fed up as well with the profusion of color, brushwork, and emotional involvement in the then-dominant avant-garde style, abstract expressionism. While some artists, such as John Chamberlain, Richard Stankiewicz, Bruce Connor, and Edward Kienholz, examined the flip side of opulence by emphasizing its effects in richly variegated assemblages of materials gathered from automotive graveyards, junk piles, and secondhand stores,² artists such as Eleanore Mikus searched for an understated means that would encourage viewers to savor subtleties instead of excesses and essences instead of illusions.

Eleanore Mikus’s shadows of the real are tablets made between 1960 and 1968 and again in the 1980s after a hiatus of almost fifteen years. They are concerned with making illusions real by pushing the surfaces of her paintings to the point where they are capable of casting shadows (fig. 1). This art is informed by Zen Buddhism, which began to fascinate Americans after World War II and became an active force in both the artistic and the literary world.³ Zen enabled Americans to find universals in their everyday world. They appreciated its irreverence, humor, toughness, and ability to shock people into an understanding of the real. They liked the fact that Zen was a nonmystical mysticism, a nonorthodox belief, and a nonsanctimonious way of achieving enlightenment; in short, they liked Zen because it opened life up to direct experience and meaning. Zen encouraged artists to avoid the pretentiousness of many styles of modern art as they examined ways that works of art could seem to be mere objects and yet remain stirring metaphors. Their understanding of Zen allowed them to distill the everyday into a style and at the same time avoid the vulgarity of



Fig. 1. Mikus, *Tablet 65*. 1963, 1966; white epoxy on wood, 16 × 12 3/4 inches; private collection

In the descriptions of works of art throughout this book height precedes width. When three dimensions are given, the last is the depth. Works are in the collection of the artist unless otherwise indicated.



Fig. 2. Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1965; paint on plywood, two parts, each 96 × 96 × 24 inches; courtesy of the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York City

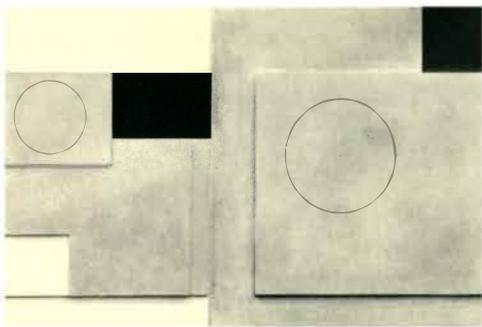


Fig. 3. Ben Nicholson, *Painted Relief*, 1939; paint on synthetic board on plywood, 32 7/8 × 45 inches; collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City; gift of H. S. Ede and the artist (by exchange)

the new in designs intended for the prosperous postwar American masses.

Although Mikus differs in remarkable ways from minimalists Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris (fig. 2), particularly in her regard for her materials and her refusal to see her work as blank, vacant, and boring,⁴ she does share their interest in reducing artistic means to only a few elements in order to slow down perception and thought. In her art she wants to encourage appreciation for the small moments of life, when one stares almost absent-mindedly at weathered pavement, worn bricks, shells on a beach, and water-washed stones.⁵ Her work anticipates many aspects of mainstream minimalism, canonized in Barbara Rose's "A B C Art" of 1965, but it also represents a refinement of the English constructionist Ben Nicholson's work (fig. 3), particularly his carved Masonite reliefs, which Mikus admires.⁶ Her low-key aesthetic requires viewers to take the necessary time to come to terms with small moments capable of catalyzing important epiphanies. It represents a quiet voice in the midst of the raucous hype of post-World War II mass prosperity and a calm that rises above much of the noise generated by advertising and idolization of the new. She names her works *tablets*, referring to the fact that people "from childhood . . . carry . . . some sort of notational record."⁷ She composes them of pieces of wood that are worked to suggest long-term use. These works, through their association with change, wear, and endurance, are symbols for human resiliency.

The tablets rely on a negative presentation of the spiritual. In Mikus's words, "I prayed and prayed and prayed and my prayers were answered and the answer was no."⁸ Even though she could not be termed a Zen follower, the humor of her statement reveals an understanding of the Zen preference for finding the universal in the mundane. Followers of Zen believe that one must silence the reasoning mind before one can begin to understand. Frequently Zen initiates concentrate on koans, paradoxes intended to frustrate the reasoning mind, and thus demonstrate its limitations and its inability to reach the far more important realm of intuitive knowledge. Similarly, Mikus avoids giving information in the tablets that would encourage a reasoned response. The inflected surfaces of her tablets, which present reality in terms of actual light and shadow rather than an illusion of light and shadow, are an analogy for the Zen recognition of the universal in the everyday.

Mikus discovered the tablets after two years of experimentation, which began in 1958, when she started using plastic glazes for a series of abstracted still lifes that continued to rely on an abstract expressionist vocabulary of overlapping biomorphic shapes (pl. 1). In 1960, after having taken courses at New York University, the New York Art Institute, and the Art Students League, she began thinking about paint as a form of glue and began to investigate the aesthetic potential of glue in *Window I* (pl. 7), which consists of

stamp hinges glued on wood, and in an even more experimental work of the same year (pl. 6), made of rabbit-skin glue, staples, and loose-leaf reinforcements on wood. Her choice of materials began to dictate a grid format, even more apparent in *Ortho* (pl. 4). Her use of new materials and her interest in serial imagery put her in the forefront of artistic innovation. Her *Window I* can be compared to Jasper Johns's *Grey Alphabets* of 1956 (fig. 4); her untitled experimental work of 1960 (pl. 6), to Carl Andre's *Cedar Piece* of 1964; and her *Garden* of 1959 (pl. 2), to Myron Stout's untitled work (no. 3) of 1956 (fig. 5).

Although Mikus accepts the idea of a rational substructure on the order of the grids in *Window I* and the untitled piece incorporating loose-leaf reinforcements, she does not allow a gridlike structure to dominate her pictures. She is more interested in playing with contradictions than in adhering to a system of logic. In *3 + 5* of 1959 (pl. 3) she joined three stretched canvases together and then painted two circles that span the divisions so that the circles create a compositional unity that the background denies. In *Ortho* she makes that breach of logic even more emphatic when she suggests a regular system of circles without subscribing to it; circles of various colors and sizes overlap only four of the six panels making up the composition. Her works, then, play on a Zen disregard for logic as they thwart the viewer's initial expectations.

Tablet I (pl. 11) is one of the few pieces in this series that is made up of pieces of wood glued to a plywood support. In this work Mikus continues to explore ideas about separate elements joined to make a whole, but the pieces of wood in *Tablet I* allow her the freedom to join background and foreground into one forceful, oscillating plane. When discussing this work, Mikus compares it to the undulating planes making up the palm of the hand, worn heels on shoes, and uneven sidewalk pavements.⁹ To achieve those uneven effects, she relied on the textures of roughly sawed pieces of wood, the resulting variations in spacing that occurred when joining them together again, and the subtle differences in surface planes resulting from judicious sanding. Because *Tablet I* looks as if it were once a unified plane, subjected to wear and dismemberment before being reassembled in an attempt to reinstate a pristine quality, it communicates feelings of nostalgia.

In some of the tablets that followed *Tablet I*, Mikus employed plywood with random industrial cuts (pls. 12, 14, 20). Sometimes she ripped the plywood with a saw to make additional cuts before joining the resultant pieces together with Weldwood glue and reinforcing them on the reverse with braces. In these pieces, as in the first tablet, the artist worked to achieve solidity and unity in spite of the cuts inflicted on the material. The image of unity prevailing over diversity and change in these pieces may have symbolized for her the new direction her work was taking.

Soon Mikus developed a way of making the tablets by

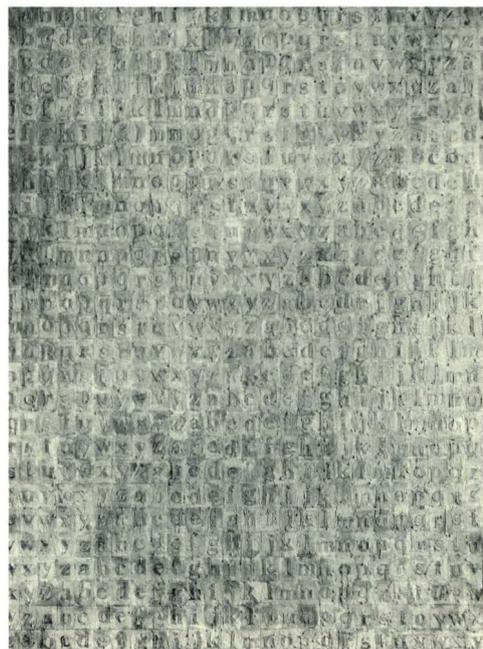


Fig. 4. Jasper Johns, *Grey Alphabets*, 1956; encaustic and newsprint on canvas, 66 × 49 inches; courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston

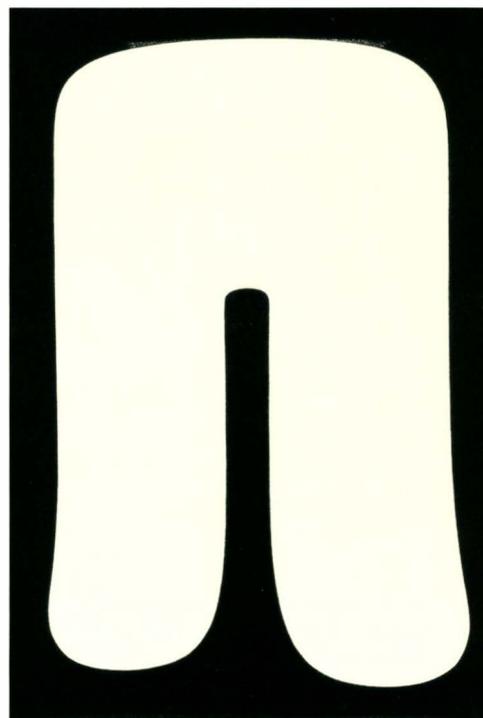


Fig. 5. Myron S. Stout, *Untitled (no. 3)*, 1956; oil on canvas, 26 × 18 inches; collection of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; gift of Leland Hazard

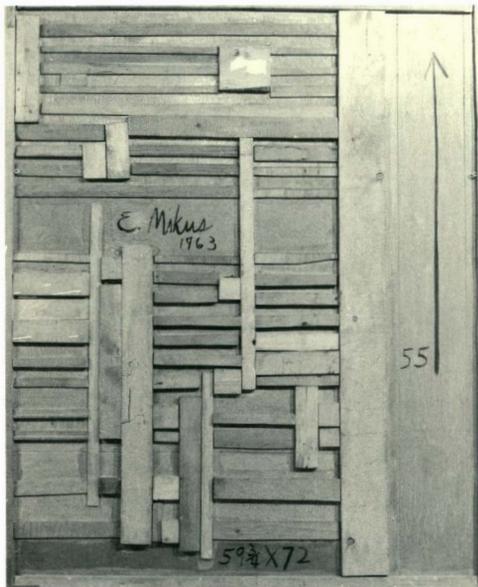


Fig. 6. Mikus, *Tablet 55*, 1963 (view of back); wood and Weldwood glue, 72 × 57 3/4 inches

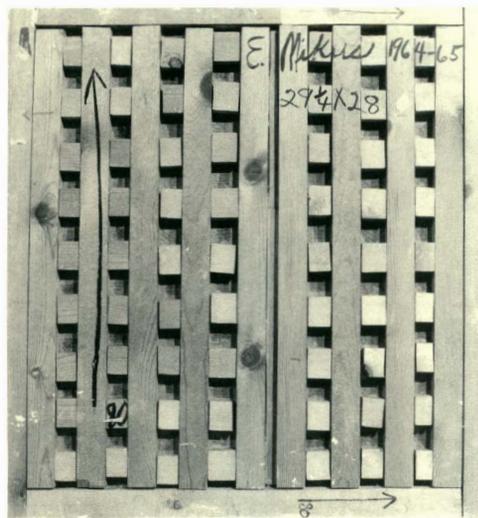


Fig. 7. Mikus, *Tablet 80*, 1964-65 (view of back); wood, Weldwood glue, and epoxy glue, 29 1/4 × 28 inches; private collection

working from the reverse to build the base structure before turning them over to assess their compositions (pls. 23, 25, 27, 36). She would begin working with a general idea and would take advantage of chance effects. She has outlined the process of constructing and painting the tablets:

1. I used my floor for an uneven surface. The more uneven, the better.
2. I cut plywood or Masonite into pieces—lots of small pieces, some larger, and some very large.
3. I placed them on the floor (all the time thinking how the front would look without actually seeing it, because it was face down).
4. I cut my braces and glued them on the seams, placed different weights for different pressures so that the front would have deep and shallow recesses and the lines between the sections would be narrow, very thin, wide, etc.—always thinking about the front while working the back.
5. I raised the piece, sometimes ripping it off the floor (because of the glue), and some of the floor would come with it. Sometimes it would work, and sometimes I'd work it out.
6. I assessed it and made some changes—sometimes not. I reversed it again and put the outside brace or frame on it (think of it as the frame a canvas is stretched over).
7. I beveled and sanded the sides. That is why some of my paintings are a sixteenth to an eighth of an inch off from side to side or top to bottom.
8. I put a coat of gesso on the work to see again how it would work and then put on more coats of gesso—six or so—and then the paint.
9. I worked the back to be sure it was braced well and filled in any gaps with support material [figs. 6, 7].
10. To all that there are a few exceptions. When making *Tablets 171* [pl. 49] and *173* [pl. 50], I glued pieces on the plywood, sized them with gesso, and then painted them.
11. I never used found objects for the tablets. If someone did not need a bit of two-by-four, I took it for the brace or frame. I used one-quarter-inch or one-eighth-inch plywood or Masonite. I burned out many tools and kept three or four paintings going at one time.
12. When creating fiberglass-on-plywood paintings, I used the same system. However, after I raised the paintings, I covered the surface with a thin piece of fiberglass and then used the resin to harden it.

13. When I created the fiberglass-shell paintings, I situated the form on the floor face up and put fiberglass and then the hardener on it. Then I turned the piece over and ripped the form out.

14. My one and only painting on aluminum was covered with fiberglass. It had no bracing on the back [see fig. 8, which represents a working state of *Tablet 170*, pl. 48].

15. Most paintings took me six weeks to a couple of years to complete.

16. I never used blocks of wood, except as utility braces, because the painting had to be thin enough to bend, twist, move, etc. I used pieces of thin wood or Masonite, for instance. MoMA's [pl. 32] is on Masonite.

17. When the painting was finished, I documented it in a black sketchbook: I sketched it, numbered it, and wrote down any pertinent information about it [fig. 9]. Photography at that time was not able to capture the nuances in the painting.¹⁰

The backs of *Tablet 55* and *Tablet 80* (see pls. 23, 30) indicate her range, from an improvisational composition (fig. 6) to a carefully plotted structure (fig. 7). Both works demonstrate Mikus's need to compose the tablets out of real substances with depth so that the shadows are actual, not simulated.

In the 1960s Mikus used sandpaper to refine the edges of the wood—both plywood and Masonite—and arrive at a mellow, fluctuating surface that looks worn (pls. 18, 22). She frequently compares the tablets to driftwood or to surfaces worn smooth by the touch of innumerable hands.¹¹ On one occasion she said: "When people put tokens in for the subway, they then touch the surface of the turnstile and gradually wear away the paint and the wood. I like to get that quality in my tablets."¹² That quality of wear, which is crucial to her tablets, distinguishes them from monochromatic paintings by other artists such as Agnes Martin and Robert Ryman. The look of wear and erosion unifies her surfaces and makes them harmonious. One might even say that Mikus caresses surfaces, while most monochromatic artists paint flat planes.

The quality of old age that imbues the tablets is achieved by carefully applying layers of paint and then sanding and refining them so they appear not so much to cover the wood as to be a manifestation of its essential character. Sometimes Mikus applies twenty coats of paint to achieve the right degree of inner luminosity, and then in some pieces she waxes the surface to sustain its subtle glow (see pls. 41, 45). In many of the tablets painting and sanding are part of the creative process. Although the tablets achieve the patina of age, they also manifest the quality of a gracefully inflected whole. In other words, the tablets appear ancient and immaculate at the same time. Even where the materials have been

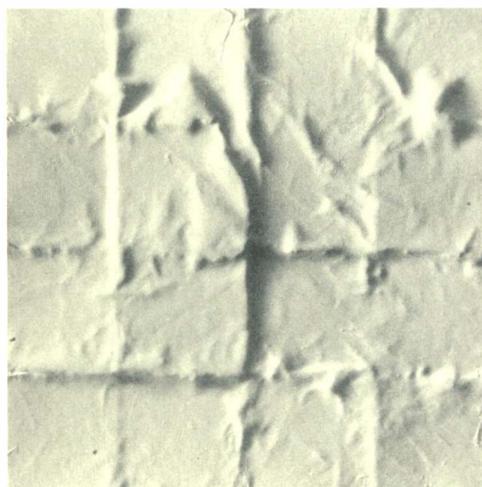


Fig. 8. Mikus, *Tablet 170*, 1967–68 (working state); fiberglass on aluminum, 24 × 23 1/2 inches

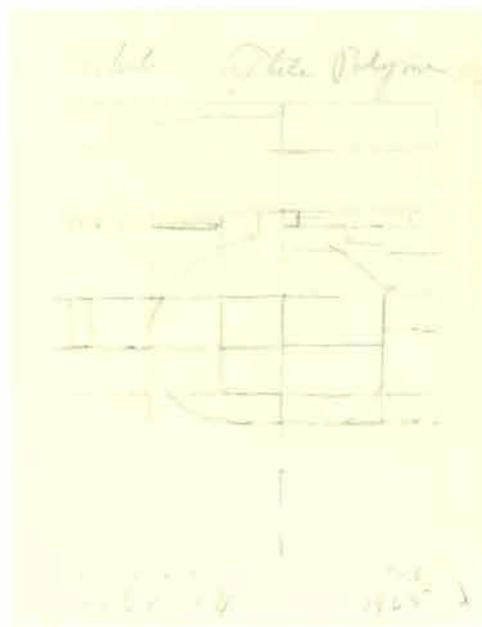


Fig. 9. Mikus, drawing of *Tablet 57*, 1963; graphite on paper, 5 × 3 3/4 inches

ripped and gouged, by using glue and paint Mikus creates a finished work that is thoroughly integrated. Her use of paint achieves a structural density that is integral to the meaning of her work.

A combination of primitivism and pure essence makes up the tablets, a combination that Mikus reveres in the early Italian art of Duccio and Giotto as well as in Byzantine icons. In those early paintings stylization serves as the vehicle for the spiritual. Because icons were made according to a set of established conventions, they appear to transcend the hands that made them. In the tablets Mikus finds a similar way of playing on stylization. In her words, the tablets exhibit “dulcet tensions, a simplicity, and a oneness achieved through nonaggression, acceptance, and understanding.”¹³ They continue the abstract expressionist manner of joining psychological and aesthetic needs in order to realize the self in universal terms, even though they avoid that style’s excited brushwork and spontaneity in favor of allover, inflected monochromatic fields of unified pieces. In her notes Mikus wrote:

A need to use white only

A need for the jagged uneven but soft and gentle line

A need for the hard edged line gently curved

A need for the deep line straight as an arrow and strong and moving as the wind¹⁴

At another time she summarized her pursuit as an attempt to express herself: “What is painting but a need to express a search for something beautiful in life, some felt experience, something lacking and fulfilled in the work.”¹⁵

The tablets depend on the formalist approach to art that was still dominant in the 1960s. That approach has been persuasively defined by Clement Greenberg in his brilliant, although far too prescriptive, dicta of the forties and the fifties.¹⁶ In essays and critical reviews Greenberg describes modernist art coming to terms with its limits. He declares the aesthetic to be self-defining, self-limiting, and pure. His remarks below are apposite for Mikus’s development since they are sympathetic to the leading role of painting and since they detail the approach she has personalized in the tablets, where she pushes painting to its limits:

The desire for “purity” works . . . to put an ever higher premium on sheer visibility and an ever lower one on the tactile and its associations, which include that of weight as well as of impermeability. One of the most fundamental and unifying emphases of the new common style is on the continuity and neutrality of a space that light alone inflects, without regard to the laws of gravity. There is an attempt to

overcome the distinctions between foreground and background; between occupied space and space at large; between inside and outside; between up and down (many modernist buildings, like many modernist paintings, would look almost as well upside down or even on their sides). A related emphasis is on economy of physical substance, which manifests itself in the pictorial tendency to reduce all matter to two dimensions—to lines and surfaces that define or enclose space but hardly occupy it. To render substance entirely optical, and form, whether pictorial, sculptural or architectural, as an integral part of ambient space—this brings anti-illusionism full circle. Instead of the illusion of things, we are now offered the illusion of modalities: namely, that matter is incorporeal, weightless and exists only optically like a mirage. This kind of illusionism is stated in pictures whose paint surfaces and enclosing rectangles seem to expand into surrounding space; and in buildings that, apparently formed of lines alone, seem woven into the air; but better yet in Constructivist and quasi-Constructivist works of sculpture.¹⁷

Although the above passage might well describe Mikus's tablets, Greenberg was not prepared to see his ideas carried out in her manner and instead envisioned some of David Smith's almost two-dimensional pieces as fulfilling his requirements for modernist art. Whether Mikus was directly influenced by that section of Greenberg's essay is immaterial to the discussion at hand. Greenberg's thought then dominated the New York scene. It was impossible for any aspiring avant-garde artist to avoid his ideas, because they formed a basis for all advanced discussions of what did or did not constitute modern art's rightful purview. The importance of Mikus's painted reliefs does not rest on her adherence to Greenberg's principles, because those principles formed the basis of such dissimilar schools as color field painting (which Greenberg admired) and minimalism (which he detested). Her significance depends on the merits of her individual works and their ability to rise above modernist dogma to convey poetic insights into the modern world and the human struggle to gain a place in it.

Mikus's friendship with Ad Reinhardt is informative, for he appeared to follow most Greenbergian prescriptions while parodying them and himself in works that are avant-garde as well as academic (fig. 10). His enlightening humor is a solid foundation for his Zen approach to the world as well as a means for dealing with the hegemony of Greenberg's thought. Reinhardt and Mikus became friends in the 1960s, after she had already begun the white tablets. In fact, even though he hated the color white, Reinhardt was impressed enough with her work, which he saw in a group show in 1961, to want to meet her.

Mikus shared with Reinhardt an interest in oriental art. In

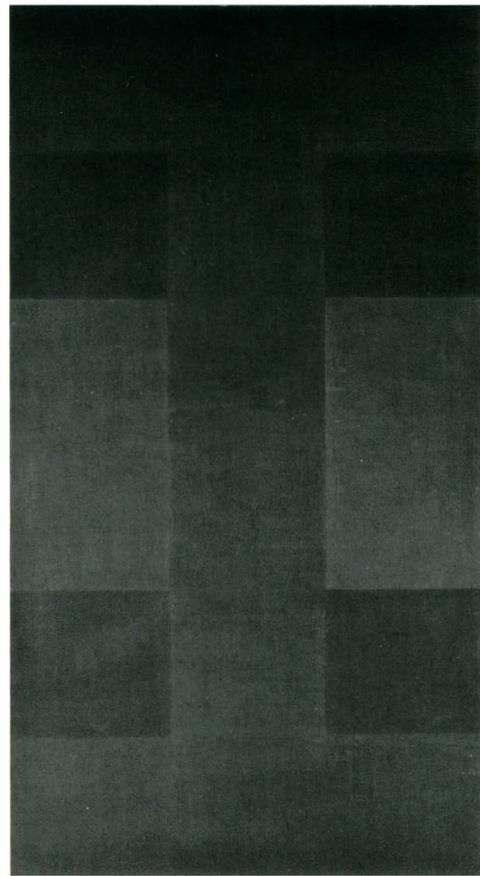


Fig. 10. Ad Reinhardt, *Painting*, 1956; oil on canvas, 80 1/4 x 43 1/8 inches; collection of the Yale University Art Gallery; university purchase

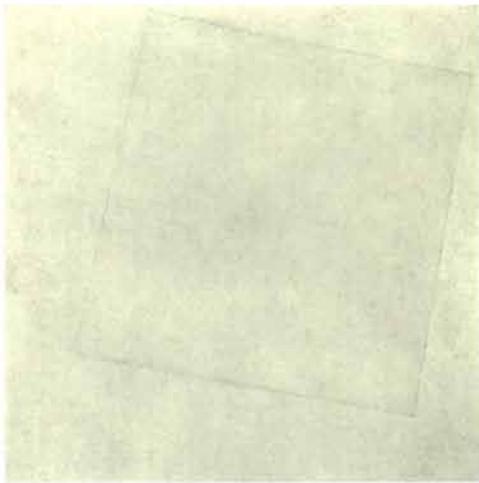


Fig. 11. Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918; oil on canvas, 31 1/4 x 31 1/4 inches; collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York City

1966 she studied Eastern art on her own and even became a member of Asia House. That year she received a Guggenheim fellowship in painting and thus had the time to pursue her interest. Her fascination with oriental art was no doubt anticipated by her early white, gray, and black tablets, which are a modernist manifestation of the same concern for essences that characterized the work of Chinese and Japanese monochromatic painters.

In 1967 Mikus went to the University of Denver to earn a Master of Arts degree in oriental art history. While there, she wrote a master's thesis that investigated the influence of Wang Wei on southern landscape painters. Wang Wei, an eighth-century painter who treated monochrome mainly from the standpoint of chiaroscuro and who discovered the principles that govern the fading of colors and forms in the distance, provided Mikus an opportunity to study the beginnings of monochromatic painting in the East, since he had initiated it. Significantly, her thesis contains statements sympathetic to formalism—statements that could, in fact, apply to her own work—such as her reference to the fact that “voiceless poetry is another name for paintings in China”¹⁸ and her assessment of Wang Wei's contribution as an attempt “to simplify the objective images of the world and replace them with ideal images which, through his prolonged meditation, were free of nonessentials.”¹⁹ Similar to her own art, which veers away from the matte surfaces of modern painting and sculpture to achieve in white, gray, and black tablets luminous effects akin to atmosphere in nature, Mikus finds, “By the very nature of monochromatic painting the Chinese were led to express atmospheric perspective by means of tone value and harmony of shading instead of color.”²⁰

Black and white have special meaning for Mikus, who takes advantage of their everyday associations and at the same time goes beyond them. She has found that people regard the white tablets as difficult because they associate white with purity, absoluteness, and death.²¹ She understands that resistance but thinks that the white tablets embody a sense of life and peace. “They have an almost childlike simplicity,” she has noted, “which is all the more sophisticated for being that way.”²² White is quiet, serene, self-involved, and contained. While the white tablets are as mysterious as the black ones, they are not aggressive. The black tablets are oxymorons: they are shadows manifested as solid forms, reflections of themselves and their own mystery, threatening forms that bespeak an absence different from the absolute presence and intriguing absences of the white tablets. Because the white tablets suggest being through its absence, Mikus finds them challenging and intriguing and therefore returns to them periodically.

While the white tablets have an apparitional quality that is both evanescent and real, the black ones assertively proclaim themselves. Part of the special quality of the black tablets is due to the

inherent qualities of the color black, which is associated with darkness, power, and the unknown, and part is due to Mikus's recognition that these works need to be handled differently from the white and even the gray ones. Her meditations in black (see pls. 38, 41, 42, 44, 50, 54) are more assertive and hieratic than her other pieces. They, together with the few dark gray pieces, such as *Tablet 109* (pl. 37), employ an almost unrelenting repetition. They depend not so much on nuances as on the sheer quantity of boldly repeated simple shapes. *Tablet 154, 155, 156, 157, 158* (pl. 43), which can be displayed as one tablet or five, epitomizes that approach. Although beautiful, the gray tablets are neither as mysterious as the white ones nor as forceful and assertive as the black ones. The gray tablets tend to meld into the shadows they evoke rather than provide a screen for them, as do the whites, or serve as a foil for them, as do the blacks.

Mikus's white tablets belong to Western culture's fascination with white, which began with members of the late nineteenth-century aesthetic movement, including William Godwin, who reorganized James McNeill Whistler's house by clearing it of remnants of Victorian lugubriousness and by opting for pure white walls to show off collections of Japanese prints and blue and white porcelain. Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the Scottish architect, and his English-born designer-wife, Margaret Macdonald, are given credit for the first all-white room. In their Glasgow apartment, which they designed in 1900, they used white to unmask form and appear as pure presence. Almost two decades later white was used to transcend aesthetics in the interests of spirituality in Malevich's painting *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (fig. 11). This new understanding of purity even became a means for disciplining nature in Vita Sackville-West's all-white garden, which she developed at Sissinghurst Castle after World War II.

The aesthetics of white at times overwhelmed its spirituality in the international style of architecture embraced by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, which adhered to the new practice of painting walls a pure, unadulterated white. In such spaces white works of art have come to be associated with the density of abstract thought and to be regarded as too complex to be easily divided into comprehensible parts. It is the abstractness and elusiveness of white that inform Jean Arp's surrealist sculpture (see fig. 12), Sol LeWitt's industrially fabricated minimalist permutations, and Mikus's tablets, giving them a distinctly modern look and yet making them appear resistant to innocent inquiries and casual investigations. They force viewers to take them seriously by regarding their contents as significant, though not easily understood.

Mikus began making paperfolds as a way of communicating the idea of the tablets to a larger audience. The first paperfold

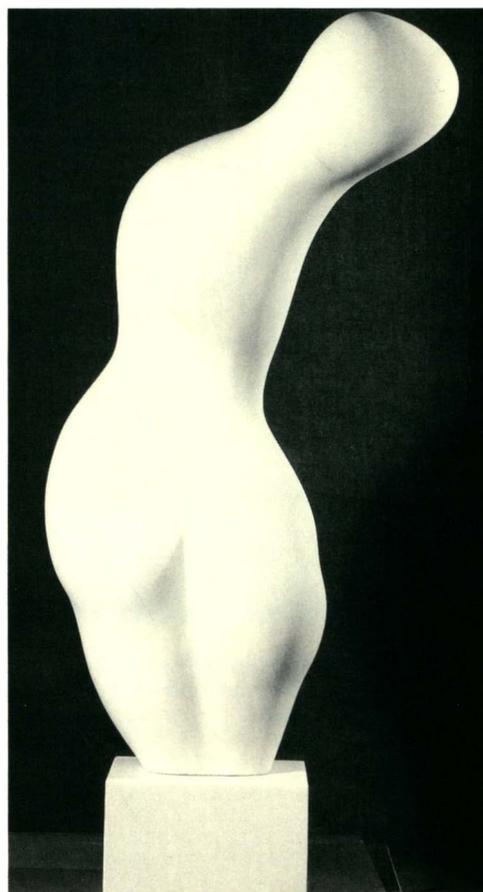


Fig. 12. Jean Arp. *Torse Gerbe* [Sheaf Torso], 1958; marble, 44 1/2 × 25 1/2 × 16 1/2 inches; Nathan Emery Coffin Collection of the Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines; Coffin Fine Arts Trust Fund

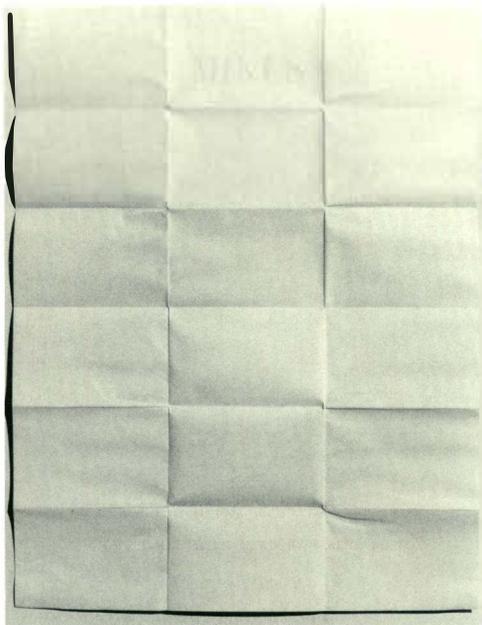


Fig. 13. Mikus, *White Paperfold Flyer*. 1963
(poster for a show at the Pace Gallery, Boston);
paper, 28 1/2 x 22 inches

(fig. 13) was made in 1963 as a flier for her first all-white show at the Pace Gallery in Boston. Before that exhibition Mikus had been accustomed to transforming index cards into folded reliefs (see pl. 68), which she used as sketches for her tablets. And in 1961 and 1962 she made several cardboard folds (see pl. 10) as a way of anticipating the effects of light and shadow in the tablets. The flier for the all-white show made her realize that paperfolds could be important works in their own right as well as an ongoing way of studying the light and shadow essential to the tablets. Similar to the tablets, the paperfolds allow Mikus to transform line into an actual gully capable of manifesting a real shadow. And also similar to the tablets, the paperfolds exist on the threshold of the imperceptible, demanding viewers' intense concentration as well as their time. In much the same manner as the tablets, these works slow down artistic perception to the real time involved in viewing actual paperfolds. They work in a similar manner to such new Italian films as Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'écclisse*, in which a minute of film time is a minute of real time. If viewers ask what they are perceiving, the answer is similar to the response given Zen initiates who wonder what one does after enlightenment: One does the same mundane things as before, but with a new understanding that transforms daily life into something wondrous.

"What I am trying to paint and say," Mikus once wrote, "is the feeling which is beneath all that is seen on the surface. I have found the more you look out the less you see. It seems only through a reverse that one can see. I make my own colors."²³ According to Zen, the enlightened see the everyday and the universal as one. That adventurous look into elements of the real world and into the ways that art partakes of the world's everyday aspects helps explain Mikus's assertion that her black, white, and gray works don't deny color, but accept it.²⁴ They accept color as a necessary concomitant of light and shadow, which, if given free play, will illuminate an object with all the colors of the spectrum. In Mikus's work the subtlety of color through light and shadow demands that observers be extraordinarily patient in order to discern it. The tablets and the paperfolds, then, require periods of rapt attention before revealing their contents. In the words of artist Norman Daly, they achieve maximum effect with minimum means.²⁵

In the sixties and the early seventies museum personnel gave Mikus's work the concentrated study and appreciation it demanded. During that time her work was acquired by most major New York City museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the New York University Collection, and the Newark Museum, as well as prestigious public collections throughout the United States, including on the West Coast the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California. Her work in the 1960s pulled together different traditions into unified wholes

that indicated the possibility of harmony and understanding. The tablets join Greenberg's formalism with assemblage and combine elements of the real with universal essences. Their construction makes them appear to be inscribed with experience, but their pristine painted surfaces look as if they have been left blank to serve as images of renewal. Those seeming contradictions of reality and illusion, inscription and blankness, and presence and absence give the tablets their special power and help explain why they became such fitting images for the sixties, a decade when people were searching for authenticity and renewal.

In late 1968, after enjoying critical acclaim for her tablets, Mikus dramatically changed direction by creating a neo-expressionist style that extolls simplicity and directness (see pls. 55-58). Her neo-expressionist work began in December after she had finished thirty-two editions of prints at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop (see pls. 66, 86-90). The concentration required for undertaking those prints coupled with their success may have encouraged her to undertake new experiments. At the end of the sixties many artists, including Alfred Leslie and Philip Guston, were moving in radically new directions. The changes represent a reassessment of style and its traditional limits. These artists began to feel that the high modernism of Clement Greenberg had run its course, and they realized that painters might approach art with the freedom of Picasso; that is, they could work in more than one style rather than limit themselves to the strictures of a single governing image, as occurs in the art of Piet Mondrian, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko.

Opting for the new freedom, Mikus began making stick drawings, which later developed into neo-expressionist paintings. Although her boats, planes, trains, and dragons (see pls. 55-58) might appear far removed from the subtly nuanced, radiating surfaces of her tablets, both groups of work actually derive from Zen attitudes. While the tablets de-emphasize subject matter and require a viewer to gradually approach real light and shadows, the neo-expressionist works emphasize subject matter and elicit instantaneous recognition. In the latter pieces Mikus cultivated an outgoing attitude that revels in spontaneity and simplicity. The works are intended to shock viewers into coming to terms with life and seeing it with directness and humor. The neo-expressionist paintings draw on a tradition of appreciation for children's art that is evident in German expressionism and also in the highly cerebral as well as playful works of Paul Klee. In addition Mikus's neo-expressionist style is similar to Jean Dubuffet's in its interest in the art of people with special problems. In the early 1960s Mikus taught painting to elderly immigrants in Brooklyn who had little or no formal education. She was fascinated with the freshness and directness of their forms. The experience no doubt had an impact on her later neo-expressionist works.

Although in the 1960s Mikus became part of the then-small coterie of avant-garde artists living in New York and was friends with Louise Nevelson and Andy Warhol, among others, she regarded her studio as a private laboratory and her work as intensive research into art's means and essence. With her neo-expressionist work she moved from the cloistered atmosphere of the Pace Gallery and showed first with the Grand Central Moderns Gallery before becoming part of Ivan Karp's new gallery, the OK Harris Gallery. The neo-expressionist work was probably stimulated and sustained by contacts made during her four years in England (1973–77).

When Mikus moved in the late 1970s, from London to New York City and then to Ithaca, New York, where she teaches art at Cornell University, her work also changed. Although she continued making neo-expressionist works, she resumed, after a hiatus of twelve years, the paperfolds. In 1985 she turned again to the tablets, this time in oil on canvas. The new works reflect her changed environment and her more contemplative life-style: she now looks within in order to look without. They reflect her current thinking as well as her seclusion in a Greek revival church that she has converted into a combined studio and living space. Mikus's change from the tablets to the neo-expressionist paintings and her subsequent return to the tablets in the 1980s is akin to Charles Burchfield's move from early fanciful and highly symbolic watercolors in the 1920s to paintings of the American scene and his return several decades later to the romantic works of his youth.

In the newest tablets Mikus creates an imbricated, textured surface (see pl. 59) that indicates a continued preference for subtly oscillating planes that articulate mostly monochromatic fields of color. The new works invoke the earlier tablets and the grand tradition of modernism. In the new pieces, however, an elegiac tone differs markedly from the luminous, smooth surfaces of the iconic early tablets. Instead of reflecting light, recent tablets absorb it (see pl. 62). They bespeak the grand tradition of oil painting that goes back to the late style of Titian, who recognized the ability of oil paint to suggest through insinuation and to describe without ever totally immobilizing form. In the recent tablets (see pls. 59, 60), then, Mikus pays homage to oil painting. She joins the two in formalist works in which subtlety of color at the service of a monochromatic format plays an important role. In invoking art's tradition, Mikus's new paintings (see pls. 63–65) at times call to mind the coruscations of paint making up Turner's atmospheres and the scumbled surfaces of Monet's almost abstract water lilies. She uses those ephemeral conventions to achieve the seemingly opposite effect of roughly finished old brick walls and thus metaphorically posits in a new way the Zen conundrum of how to surmount the walls built by the rational mind to achieve atmospheric freedom.

NOTES

1. Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).
2. William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), provided the most in-depth coverage of this artistic approach, which was beginning to lose its hegemony in the early 1960s.
3. Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986).
4. Barbara Rose, "A B C Art," *Art in America* 53 (October–November 1965): 57–69. This essay, one of the first to deal with minimalism, serves the important function of using the special vocabulary of minimalists Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris, who were Rose's friends, and Frank Stella, who was her husband. Such terms as *boring*, *vacant*, and *empty*, which might seem harsh criticism of their art, were in fact accepted by the artists and their coterie as words that described new, radical, and important aesthetic concerns.
5. Eleanore Mikus, conversation with author, November 1988.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Eleanore Mikus, notes, 1960s. These notes are part of the artist's archives in her studio in Groton, New York.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Mikus, conversation.
10. Eleanore Mikus, letter to author, August 1989.
11. Mikus, conversation.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Mikus, notes.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Clement Greenberg's essays, originally published in *Partisan Review*, the *Nation*, *Commentary*, *Arts*, *Art News*, and the *New Leader*, were selectively reworked for *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).
17. Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 144–45. An earlier version of this quotation first appeared in the essay "The New Sculpture," *Nation*, 11 June 1949. Elizabeth Murray is now working in the tradition of pushing painting to its formal limits that Mikus, Frank Stella, and Sven Lugin, among others, epitomized in the 1960s.
18. Eleanore Mikus, "The Influence of Wang Wei on Southern Landscape Painters with Historical Background on the Technique and Philosophy of Chinese Painting" (M.A. thesis, University of Denver, 1967), 4.
19. *Ibid.*, 5.
20. *Ibid.*, 6.
21. Mikus, conversation.
22. Mikus, notes.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Mikus, conversation.
25. *Ibid.* Daly and Mikus both taught art at Cornell University in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Daly is semiretired; Mikus is still a member of the Department of Art.