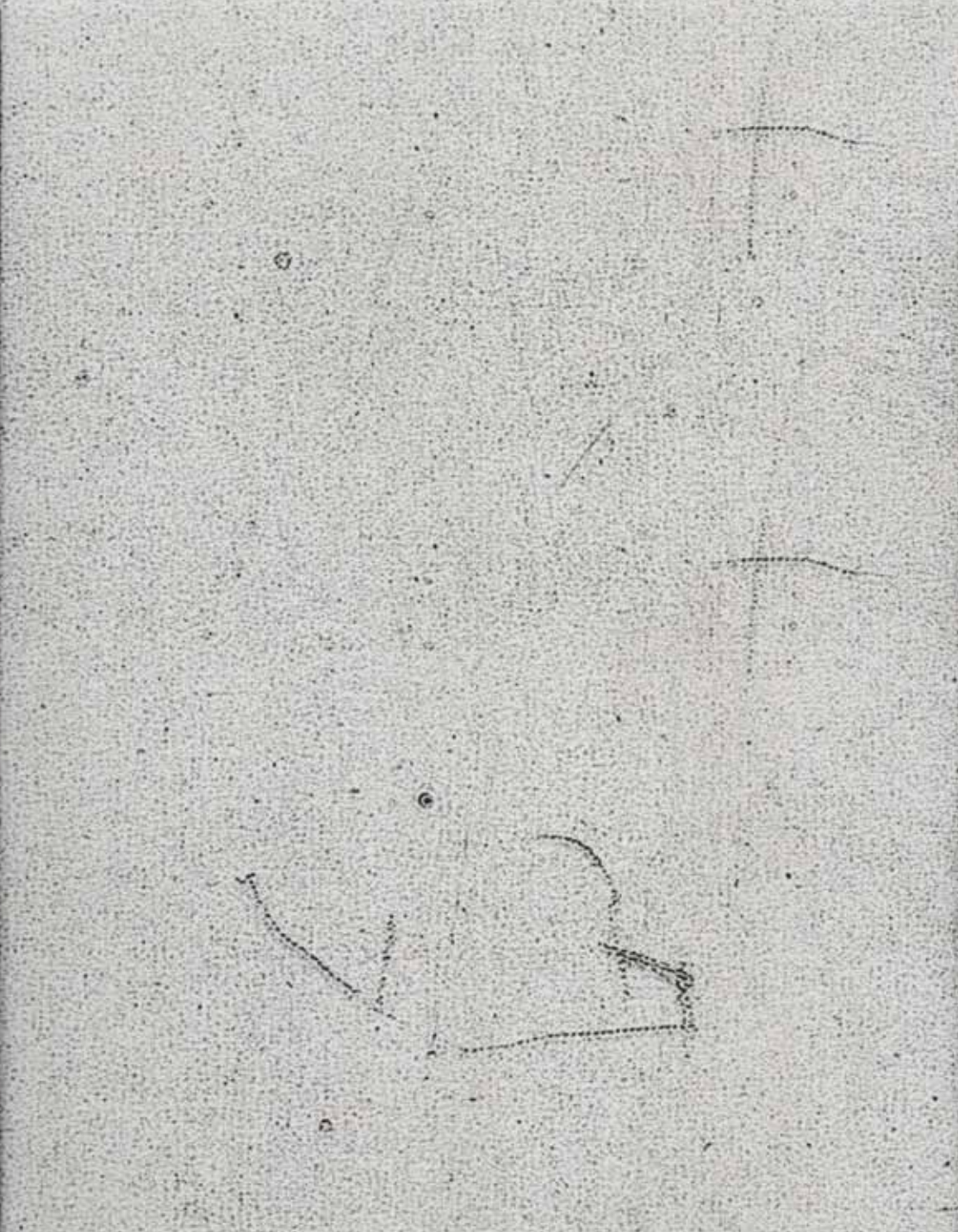


Marieta Chirulescu

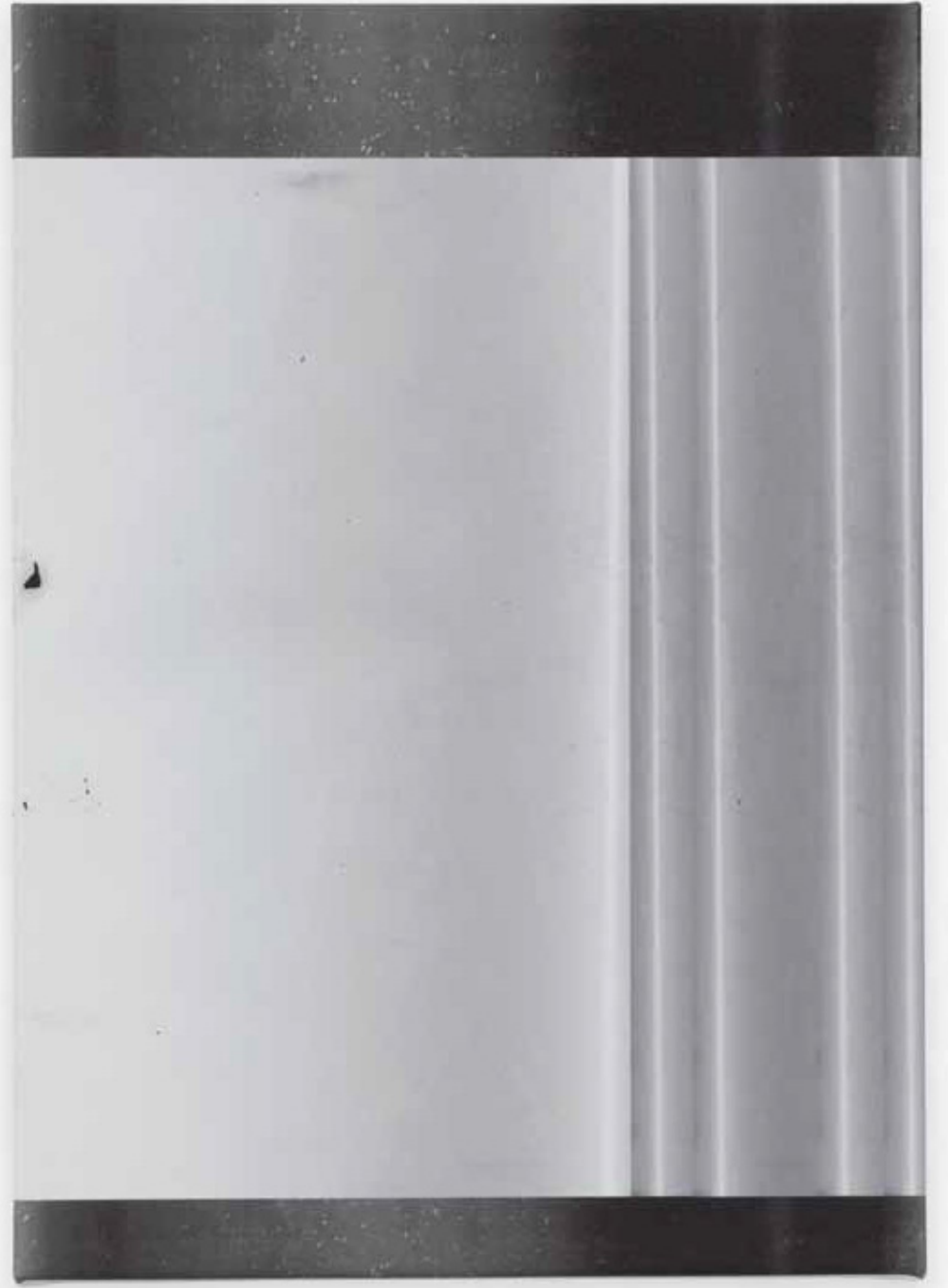


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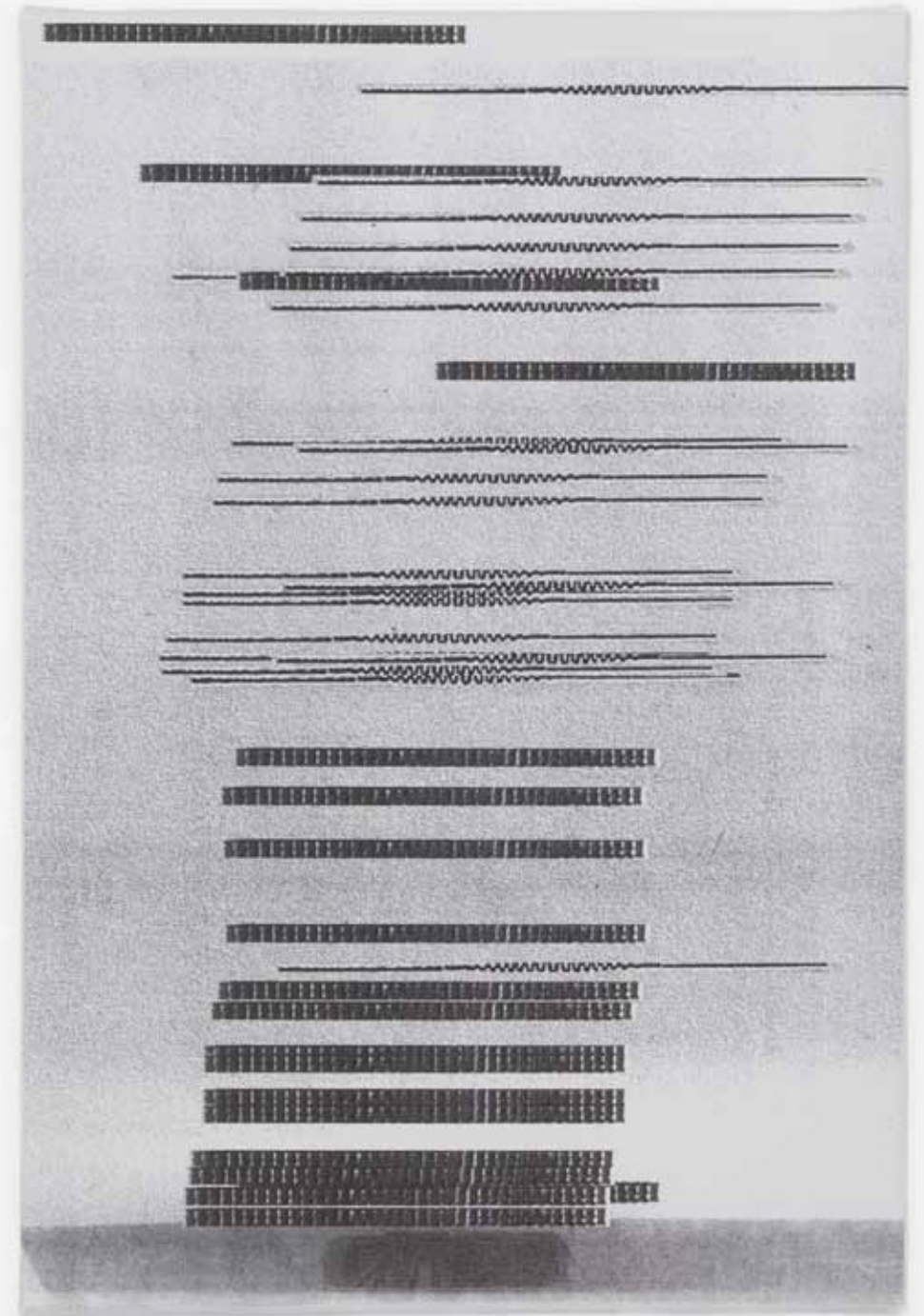
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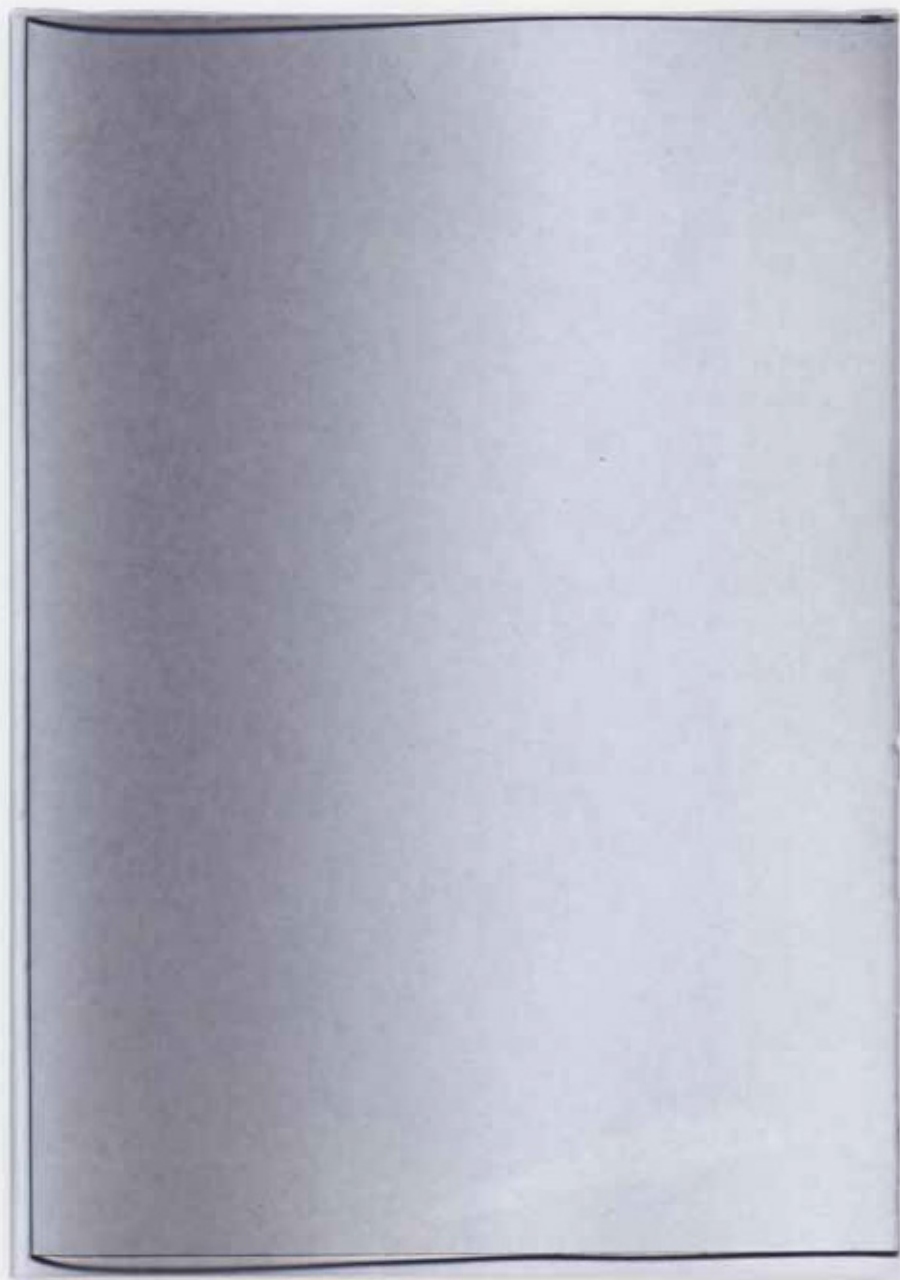
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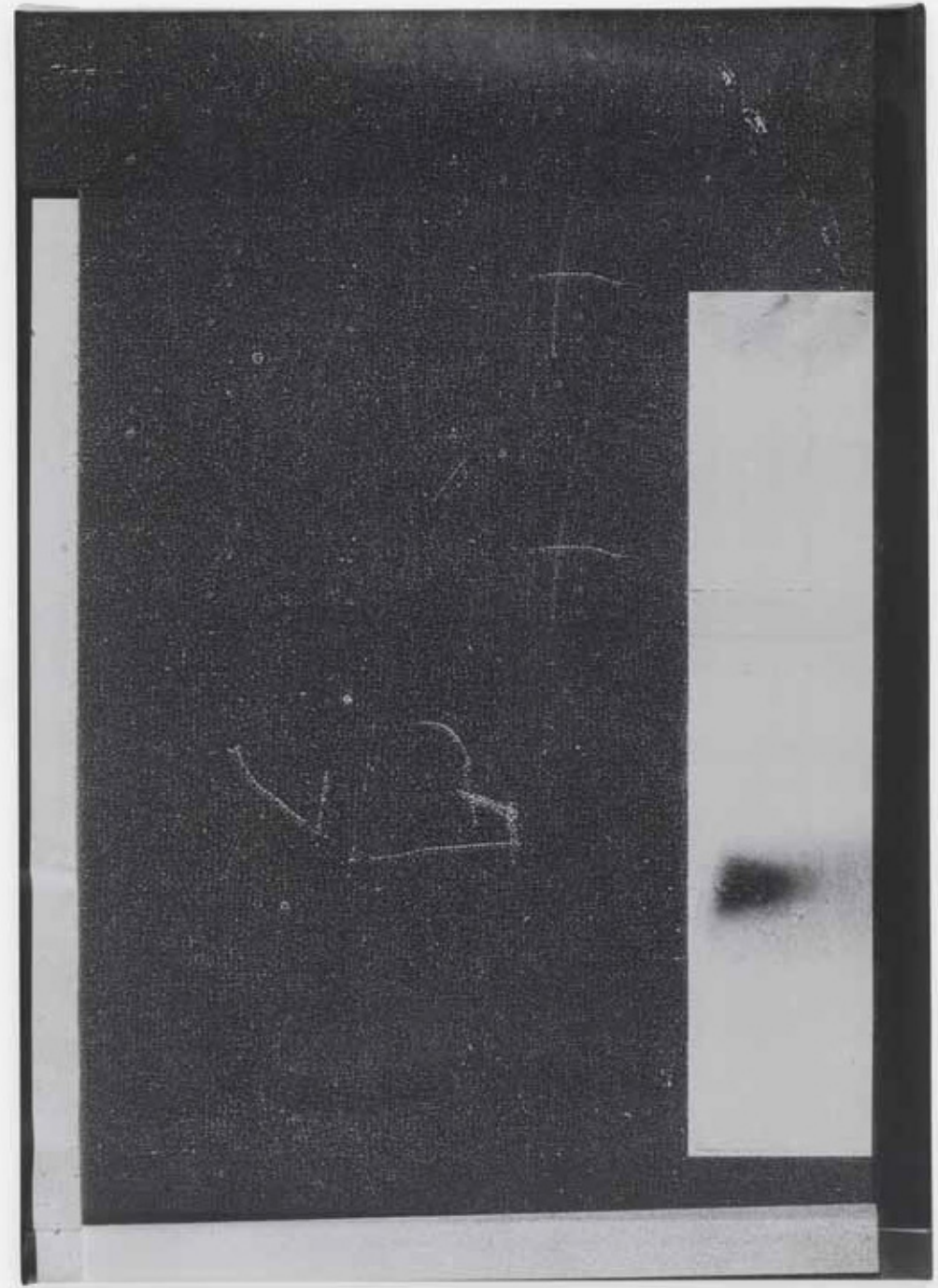


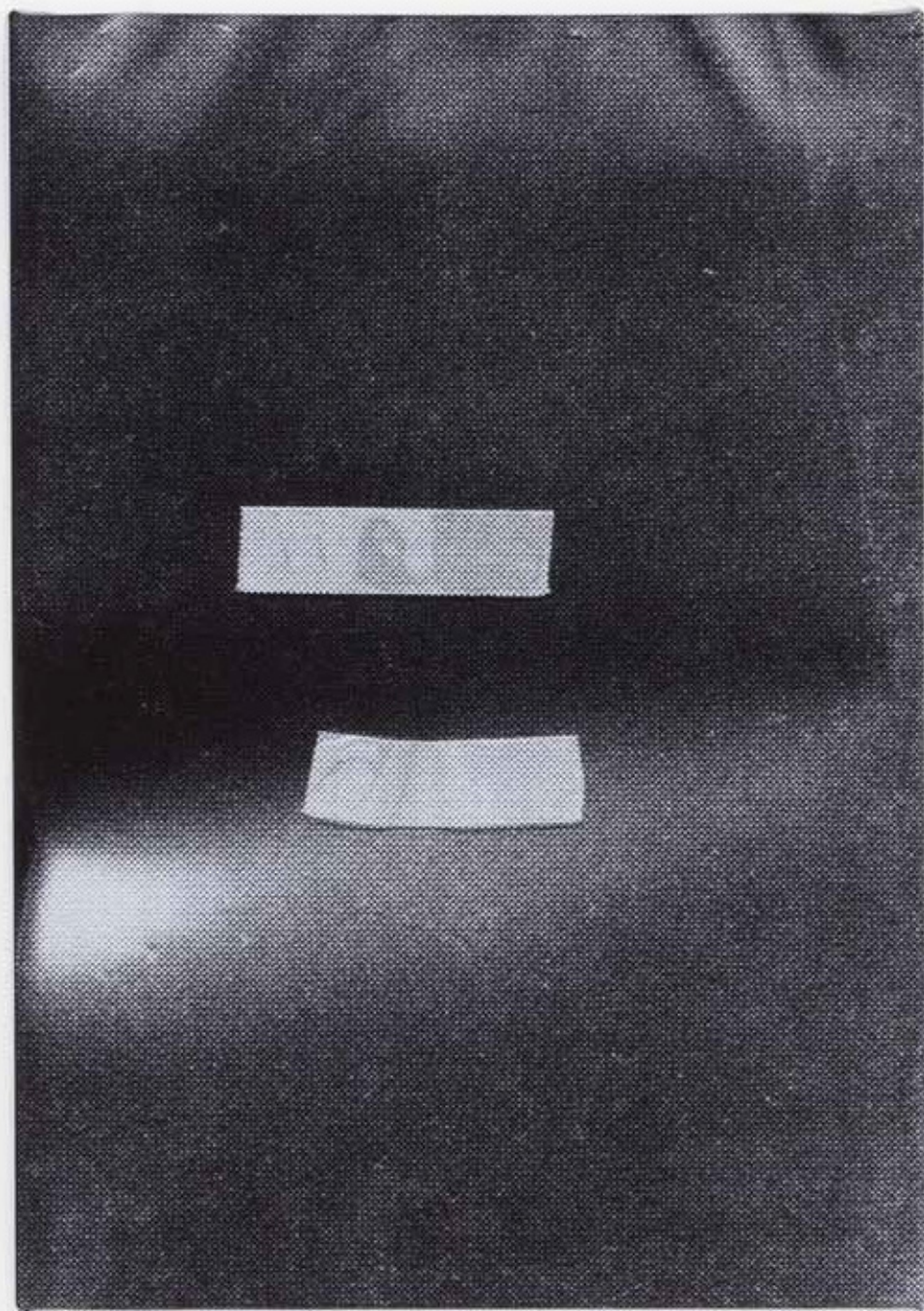


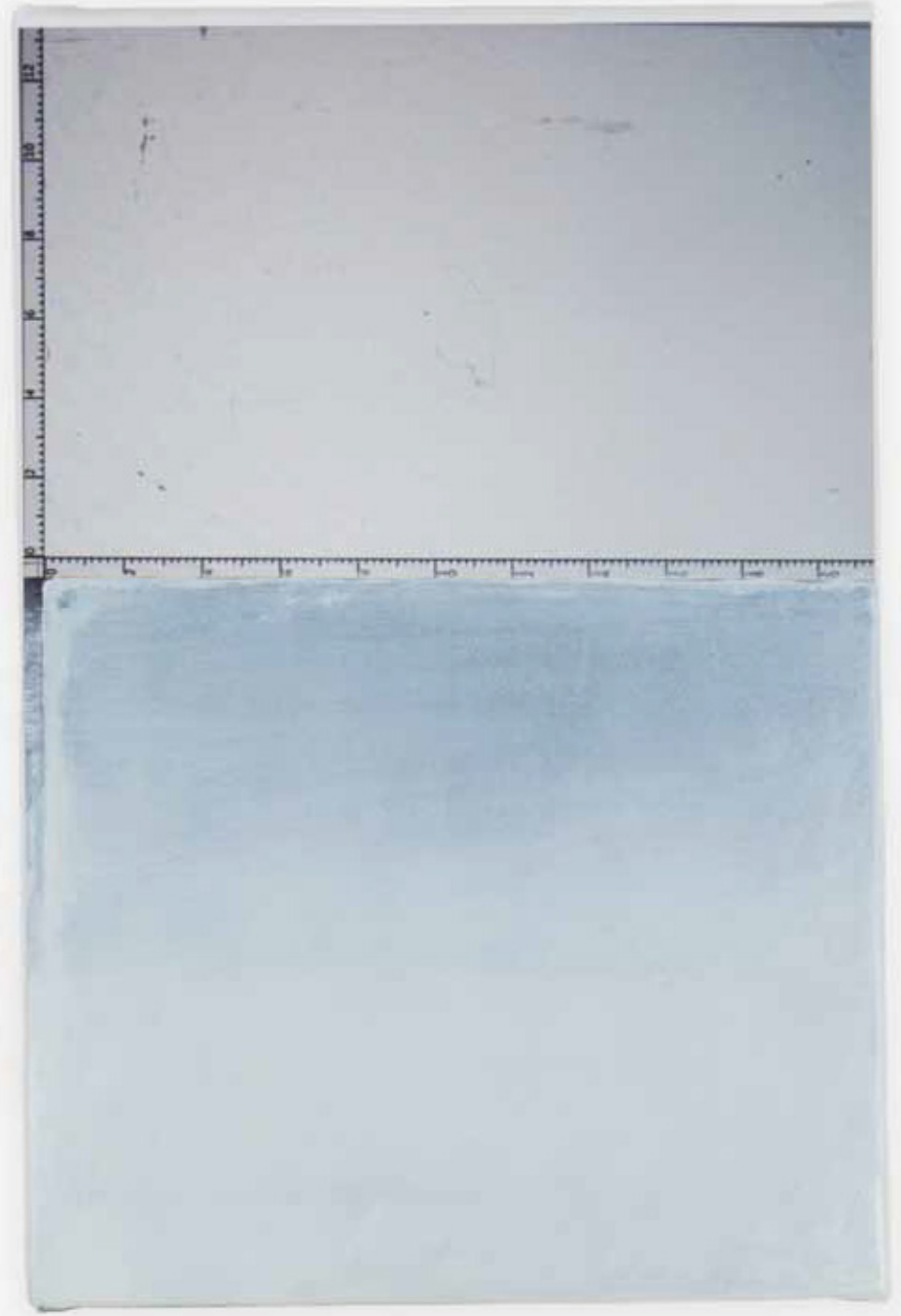


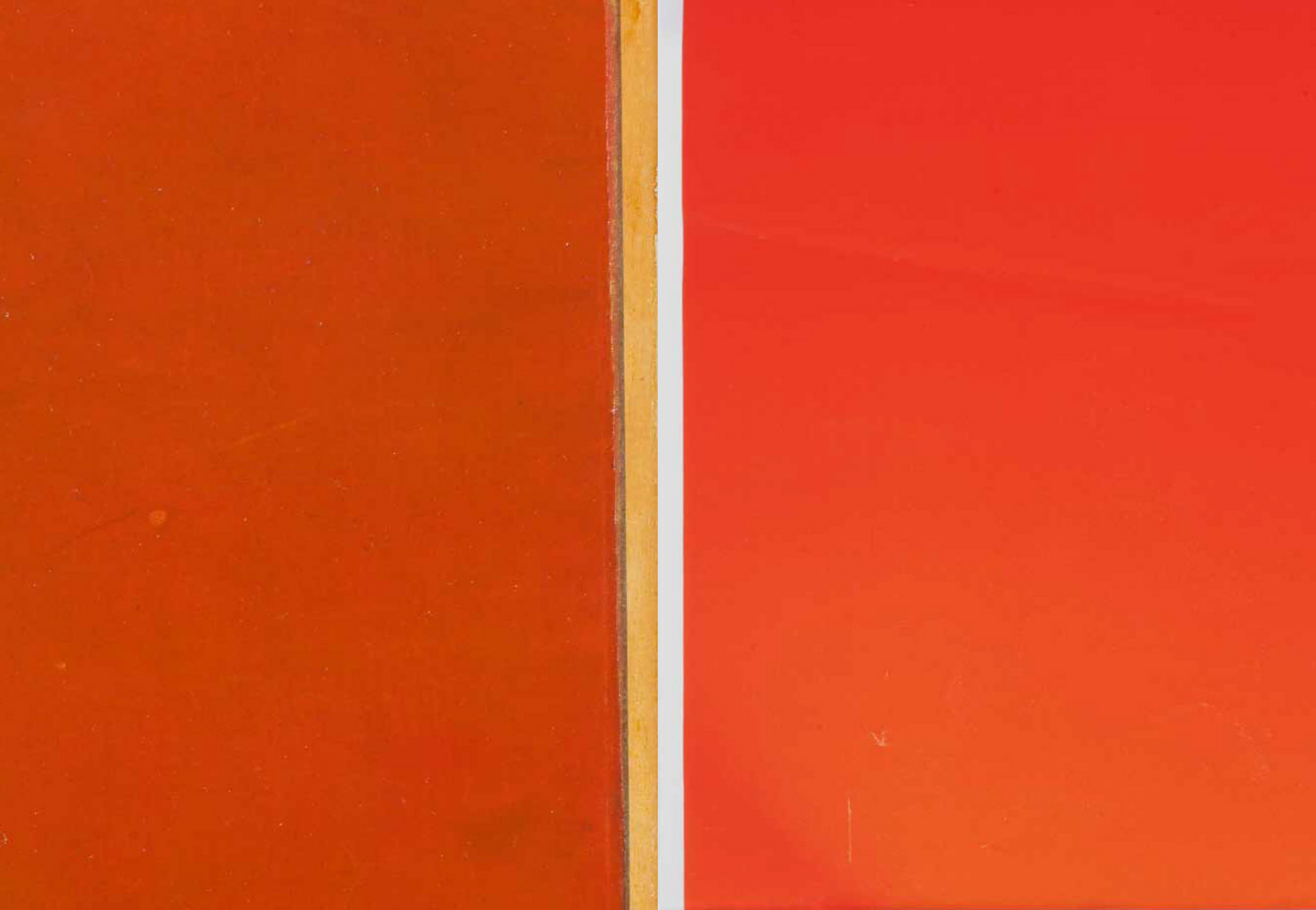


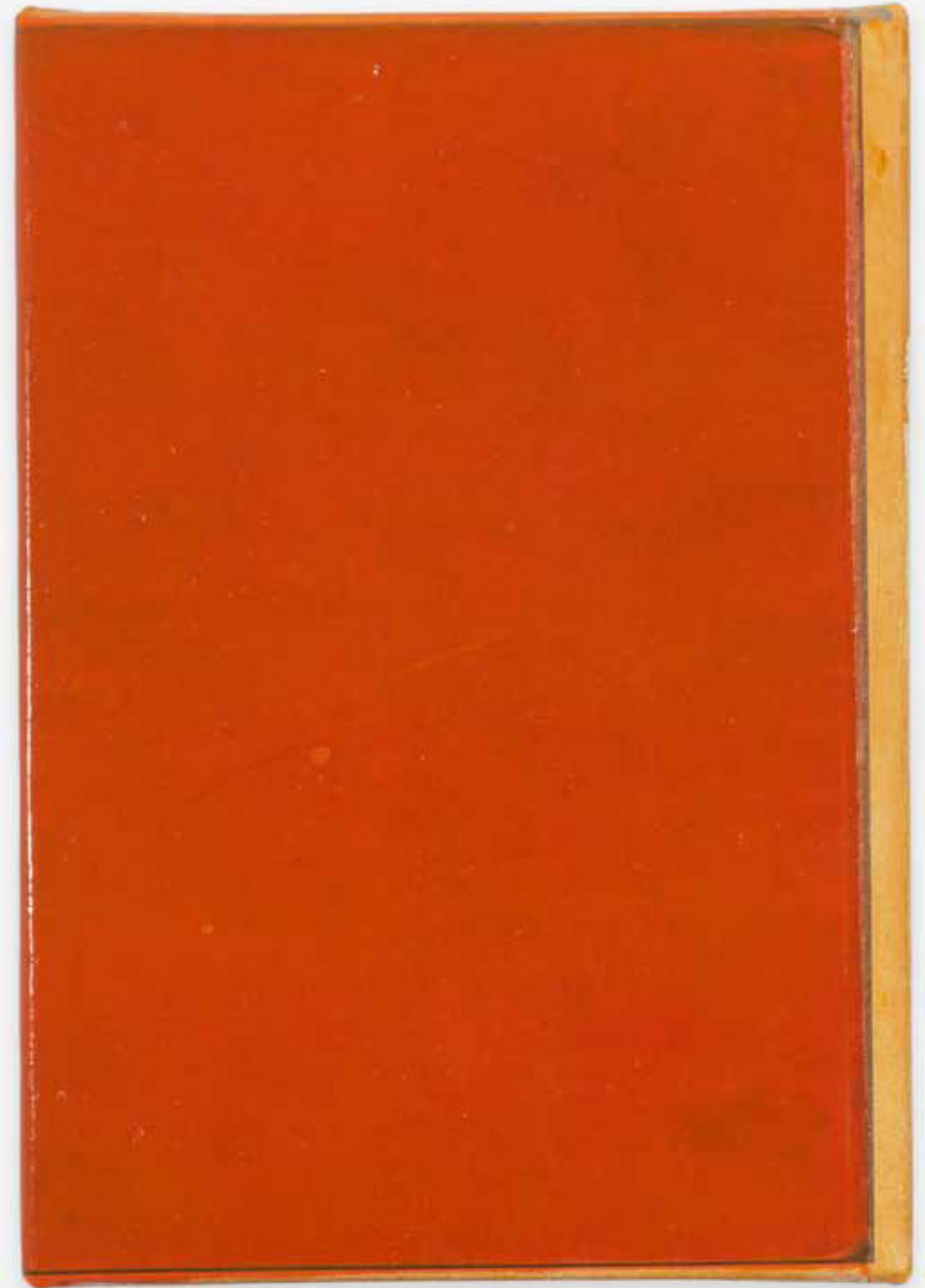












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Clement Greenberg sees Marieta Chirulescu’s work and has a nervous breakdown

I

The title of this essay might seem confusing: Clement Greenberg and Marieta Chirulescu never actually met and even if they had, it’s unlikely that they would have started a conversation about her work. We might even think it preferable that Greenberg never saw Chirulescu’s work: firstly, because we would have spared him a nervous breakdown and secondly, because it spares me the predicament of having to base any discussion of Chirulescu’s work on biographical facts, which I believe are always insufficient. I would however like to imagine Greenberg’s response to Chirulescu’s work, to promote an understanding of it in relation to key concepts in Modernism.

But why Greenberg? He is perhaps the most important art critic of the 20th century, whose ideas still have an authority, however questionable. Even if his ideas are no longer tenable, it still makes sense to consult his writings as he is a ‘founder of discursivity’ and they thus have a certain regulatory function.¹

II

Let us first consider what Greenberg would have encountered – what he, the critic with the maxim ‘eyesight alone’ would have looked at on first seeing Chirulescu’s work. First of all, he would have seen pictures, and this in itself is much more complicated than it seems. Some of these pictures are oil on canvas, some inkjet on canvas, some photocopies mounted on canvas, others a mixture of all of these and still others are inkjet or laser prints without any supporting canvas. At first glance they would certainly not be called figurative or representational, yet this is the crux of the matter. The oil on canvas works are made from flat layers of paint placed on top of and next to each other. This process of layering, albeit shrouded, also gives form to the group of works that consist of photocopies and other means of photographic reproduction, including digital processing techniques. Greenberg would have been confronted with pictures – very often in grey tones – where different layers of

more or less geometric structures seem to depict nothing but their own presence on the supporting material. By 'seeing' alone, Greenberg could not have known that most of these images represent stages in their process of creation: experiments with scanning, seemingly failed photocopies, digital calculation errors or ambiguous images resulting from other attempts at creating reproductions, or they refer to other primary, but now lost, 'sources'. He could not know this, because he would not see (or could only guess at) it and for that reason he would have hated the works. How can you show something that is both intrinsic to the picture – as in an abstract and flat entity – and also relates to an external reference? And how can this external reference be hidden in pure abstraction, even if it is based on photographic reproductions?

III

Greenberg's theories, developed in the 1940s, can be described as sober formal readings with a positivist, almost scientific approach. He was not interested in process or content and ignored any literary interpretations. His only concern seemed to be his interest in the materiality of art, certainly not in any (alleged) ideas of transcendence or spirituality that might inform the work. It is therefore not surprising that he formulated, in his seminal text, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', the principle of the dominance of the medium over whatever was depicted:

'It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself. To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized. For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically.'²

He went on to say:

'The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to 'hole through' it for realistic perspectival space. In making this surrender, painting not only

got rid of imitation – and with it, 'literature' – but also of realistic imitation's corollary confusion between painting and sculpture. [...] Under the influence of the square shape of the canvas, forms tend to become geometrical – and simplified, because simplification is also a part of the instinctive accommodation to the medium. But most important of all, the picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas [...]'³

The task of art is to find its own autonomous form, and in the case of painting, this means flatness and flatness alone. Up until the late 19th century painters tried to 'hide' the constituent elements of painting – the flatness of the picture plane, the (rectangular) shape of the canvas, the tactility (Greenberg would have disagreed with this adjective) of oil paint – in the attempt to create illusion. During the process by which art claimed autonomy from this role – in a Greenbergian sense, this is part of a historical process of rationalisation – flatness became painting's unique feature that exposes painting through its being-a-picture and not through its content. The superiority of the medium over any mimetic or representative function became the *condicio sine qua non* of Modern painting and Modernist art in general. The characteristics of modern painting came to dominate as a result of self-critique, as a reflection on painting's genuine and specific qualities, or to approach it from a different angle: the inherent laws of painting do not possess any extrinsic relation (be it a predestined intention or simply the attempt to represent).

In later texts, Greenberg described the process of abstraction as a way of eliminating anything that is 'unessential' – meaning a reductive process that tests which categories or qualities identify a painting as a painting. Greenberg also warned that this process could result in monochrome or even bare canvases hanging on the gallery walls. To address this dilemma, Greenberg simply claimed that it depended on whether a picture had 'quality'. Quality can be identified 'intuitively', meaning that it could be attributed according to purely visual perception, the result

of an instant judgment. In turn, the worst paintings are those with a cryptic structure that is difficult to decipher – those pictures that take time to understand or that are based on extrinsic references. We might therefore assume that Greenberg would not have been all that excited by Chirulescu's works, as these demand time and intellectual effort, rather than 'eyesight alone'. Intuition is replaced by criticality.

Chirulescu's work literally accumulates meaning through visual information and at the same time this information is broken into pieces, leaving almost no decipherable traces. It is hard to believe that Greenberg would attribute the mark of 'quality' to these works, and yet they are not content with simply pursuing the premise of reducing painting to its 'essential' qualities. Nonetheless, Chirulescu's work distils something that can be seen as a Greenbergian 'quality', one that has much to do with medium-specificity. The artist's use of painting and other technical means of reproduction defies expectations for accurate representation. It isn't denied the ability to represent, but nor is the use of these mediums affirmed as a means of representation. If Greenberg refers to Immanuel Kant's reflexivity, developed in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Chirulescu's work, on the contrary, is much more about the specific and sometimes random origins of abstraction. The work is not, however, determined by a 'random' principle – think of the errors or failures detailed above – instead the artist's interest in formal appearances is channelled into it.

Greenberg demanded an internal refinement and external differentiation of painting, whereby purity is the desired goal and everything extraneous should be culled or filtered. Such a cleansing leads to abstract painting, and vice versa. Chirulescu turns this process upside down, but also arrives at the same place: abstract art. While Greenberg is a hygienist who wants to expunge from the painting everything that does not necessarily belong there, Chirulescu admits and incorporates a vast amount of impure or un-purified material (not to be mistaken with 'references'), as a means of abstraction. The extraneous is, in a manner of speaking, filtered onto the 'clean' canvas, and is present in more ways than one. Firstly, there is the intrusion of a different medium, namely reprographic techniques; secondly,

there is the erroneous nature of these additions, either in the depiction of digital calculation errors or the failure to provide information about the reproduced reference. Chirulescu shows that Modernism's claim (i.e. Greenberg's) to empty out content, illusionism and allusion in favour of the concrete, is simply wrong. Quite the contrary: each medium and every material provides, in itself, content, illusion and allusion. This does not negate abstraction, but it does change its very basis. In the case of Chirulescu it can even be argued that because of her 'method' of abstraction, her works are less metaphysical – and more materialist – than those praised by Greenberg (think of Noland, Frankenthaler or Olitzki). And, paradoxically, it is a materialist approach that is preoccupied with more ephemeral and invisible processes such as information processing, but the artist shows us that even these are defined by their materiality.

Greenberg believed that painting alone was able to produce abstraction and that nothing else was able to do so, especially not photography. In a short review in 1946 he wrote:

'In the first respect modern photography, eschewing the blurred or retouched effects by which it used to imitate painting, has decided to be completely true to itself; in the second respect, which concerns subject matter, it takes this decision back. This logical contradiction is also a plastic one.'⁴

On photography, Greenberg further argued that the 'truth of the medium' relies on its seemingly intrinsic status as a means of representation, its mechanical indexicality.⁵ For him this meant that it was unable to follow a historical logic towards abstraction, which was only possible for painting. Greenberg concluded that the 'final moral' was to 'let photography be literary.'⁶ The exact opposite is at play in Chirulescu's work.

IV

If we regard Modernity – and this does not only mean Modernism – as a waking-up from the dream of representation, and photography as a means to extend that dream, Chirulescu confronts us, through both the mediums of paint-

ing and, in the widest sense, photography, with the idea that it was nothing but a dream. And if Greenberg answered the end of representation with a demand for abstraction by virtue of medium-specificity, Chirulescu, by showing us the sheer irrelevance of the medium as the sole reason for abstract art, argues that this too is a blind alley. The abstract nature of Chirulescu's work can neither be traced back to a Greenbergian idea of the 'essence' of painting nor to that of photography. Chirulescu's work transcends art in the Greenbergian sense, without relapsing to easel painting or substituting painting for a purely technical process; hers is an abstraction that is not determined by any essentialist formula.

Felix Vogel

2010—2011

Installations

- 1 — Foucault, Michel, 'What is an Author?', in Rabinow, Paul (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (Pantheon Books, New York 1984), p.114.
- 2 — Greenberg, Clement, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon', *Partisan Review*, No. 7, July–August 1940, pp.296–310, in O'Brian, John (ed.), *The Collected Essays and Criticism I* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1986), pp.32–33.
- 3 — *The Collected Essays and Criticism I*, pp.34–35.
- 4 — Greenberg, Clement, 'The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston', in O'Brian, John (ed.), *The Collected Essays and Criticism II* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1986), p.61.
- 5 — Jones, Caroline A., *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005), p.166.
- 6 — *The Collected Essays and Criticism II*, p.63.















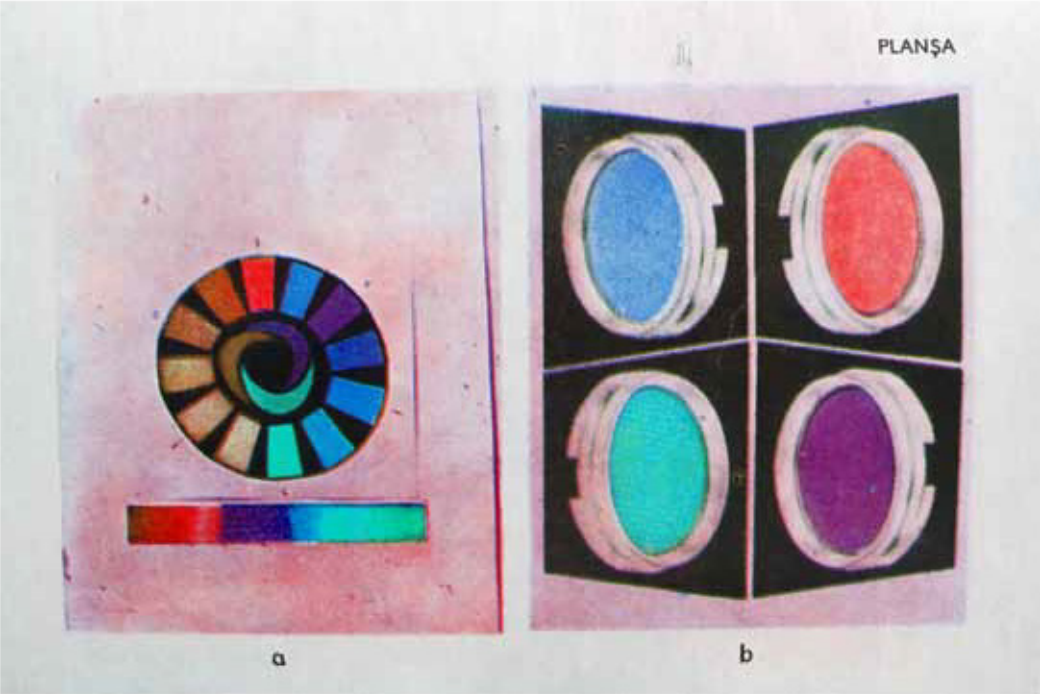
Kunstverein Nürnberg —
Albrecht Dürer Gesellschaft, 2011

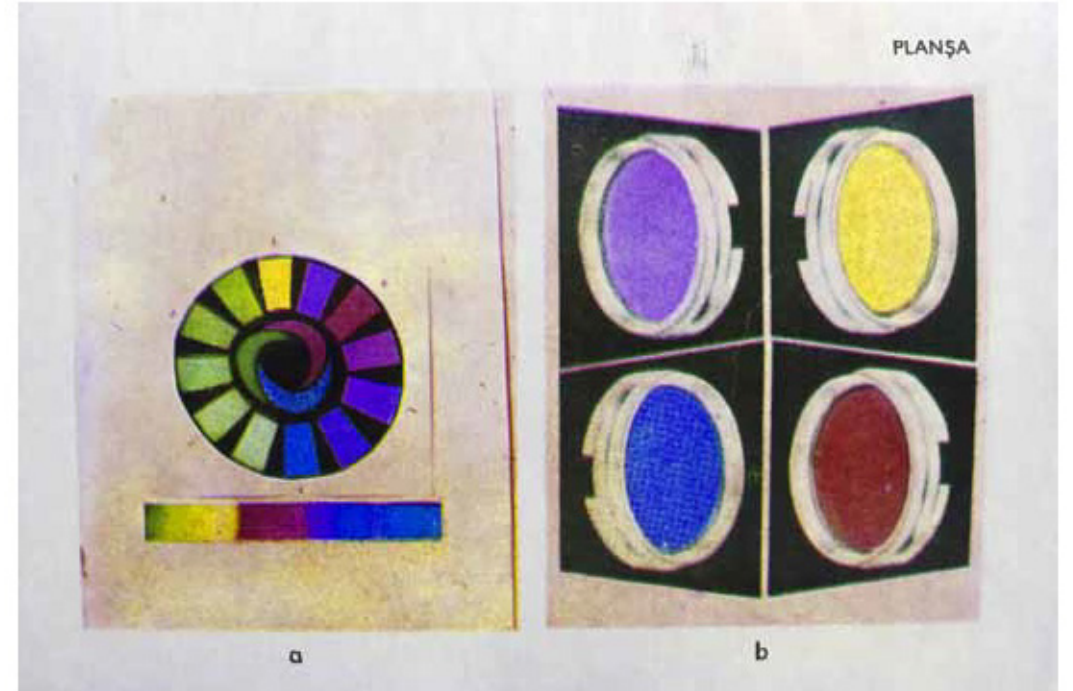
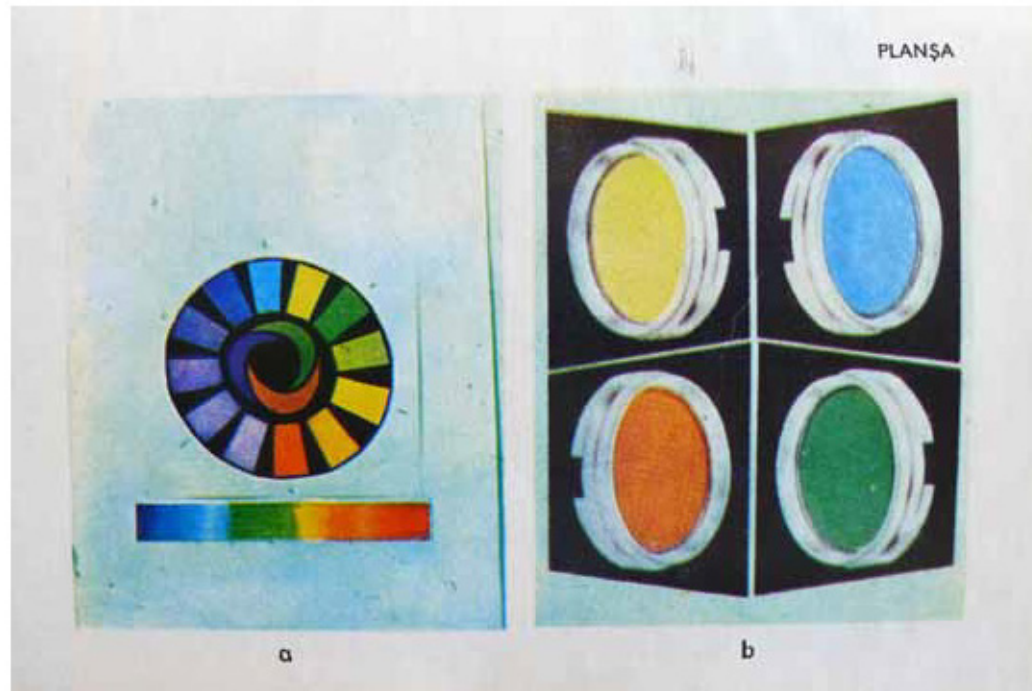




Collection Caleidoscop 104









a



b



c

Fig. 39 — Fotografii realizate
cu o singură sursă de lumină :

a — laterală ; b — de jos ;



d



e

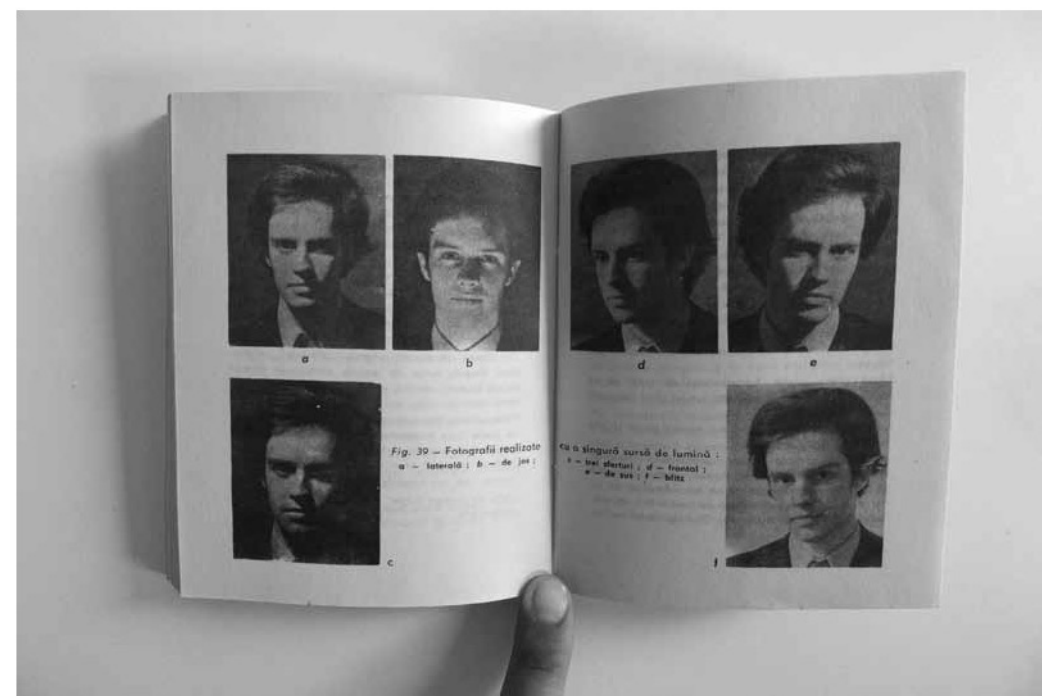
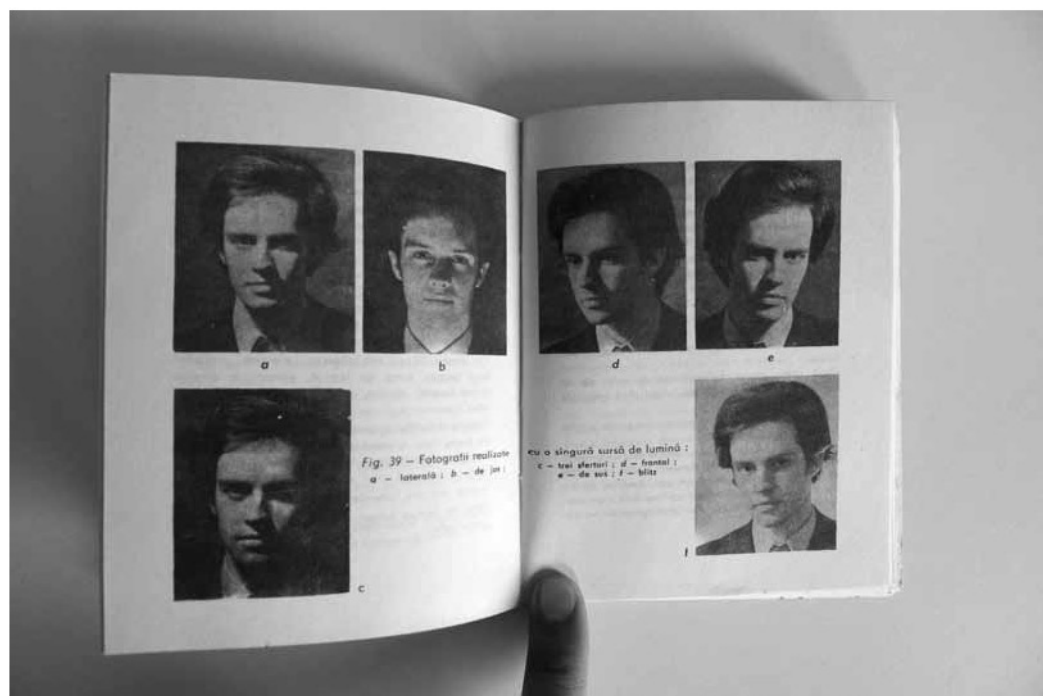


f

cu o singură sursă de lumină :

c — trei sferturi ; d — frontal ;

e — de sus ; f — înalt



Biography

Marieta Chirulescu was born in Sibiu, Romania in 1974 and lives and works in Berlin. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Nuremberg, Germany (1998–2004) and University of Fine Arts, Budapest (2001–02). Her first solo exhibition was at Kunsthalle Mainz in 2009, followed later that year by Projektraum Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin. She has since had solo exhibitions at Galerie Micky Schubert, Berlin, Kunstverein Nuremberg and Kunsthalle Basel (all 2010) and most recently at Neues Museum Nuremberg (2011). She has participated in numerous group exhibitions, including 'The Concrete Proof', Centre Européen d'Actions Artistiques Contemporaines, Strasbourg and 'Nothing to say and I am saying it', Kunstverein Freiburg (both 2009). She received the DAAD scholarship for Bucharest (2006) and the Kunstfonds Scholarship, Bonn (2008).

Marieta Chirulescu
Inside the White Cube
12 October – 19 November 2011

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