

ROBERT
MORRIS

EARLY FELTS

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ROBERT MORRIS: THE FELT WORKS REVISITED

"Literature is news that stays news," Ezra Pound said. Thirty years after Robert Morris created his first felt works, it is clear that this is art that stays news. Summing up the artistic concerns of the late 1960s, the felt pieces still succeed in looking utterly contemporary.

It may be hard to imagine the shock produced by this work when it was first exhibited. Despite the tremendous variety of his production from 1961 through 1967, Morris was best known as a leading apostle of Minimalism, a maker of simple geometric forms, rigid and intimidating. His brilliant "Notes on Sculpture" had pronounced an anathema on works with multiple parts, wall reliefs, anthropomorphic form, and anything displaying so much as a compound curve. Suddenly, in April 1968, he exhibited a series of works made from a soft, skin-like material, suspended from the wall or piled on the floor. One piece hung in a series of—yes—compound curves. "They're saying Robert Morris's sculpture has gone soft," Grace Glueck wrote in the *New York Times*, adding, "and they're right."

In an essay, "Anti Form," published the same month in *Artforum*, Morris revealed his new concern with issues of process, materials, chance, and gravity. A younger generation of artists was beginning to recognize the importance of these factors, he argued, provoked by the Jackson Pollock retrospective held by The Museum of Modern Art in 1967. What had seemed like a dead end in painting turned out to offer an excitingly unexplored road for sculpture. Acting as critic and curator, Morris drew attention to radical new work by artists such as Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, and Alan Saret.

Felt provided Morris with a flexible material for his own work, and many of his new pieces were designed to change each time they were installed. But the critics' understanding of them seemed to be rigidly fixed. A tangle of felt strips on the floor represented chaos. Bands hanging from the wall demonstrated the effects of gravity. All this was true, but the abstract analysis of materials and forces offered no explanation for the new forms that began to emerge in Morris' felt pieces of the 1970s.

In one series, begun in 1974, strips of felt were secured to the wall at two points, descending to the floor and returning in a large "V." Flattening against the wall at the top, the felt bent outwards as it descended, so that the crux of the "V" formed a pocket of space nestled against the plaster. In a later version, exhibited here, two strips descended in tandem, nestling against each other to create a denser, more enfolded space.

In another series, begun in 1976, Morris hung rectangles of felt flat against the wall. The rectangles were mounted in pairs, with the upper layer completely overlapping the lower. The corners of the upper layer were then bent back to form another "V," revealing a portion of the lower layer and creating an inviting crevice where one piece of felt curved away from the other.

From a distance, these works seem two-dimensional and pictorial; from close at hand, they are tactile and sculptural. The large, graphic "V"s provide a sexual symbol as ancient as the Cycladic idols and as modern as "Delta Lady" (the Joe Cocker hit of the mid-1970s). But the erotic charge of the work derives equally from the skin-like qualities of the felt, with its seductive combination of stiffness and pliancy, softness and porosity. In another piece exhibited here, six long rectangular strips descend to the floor from a horizontal band mounted on the wall; the individual strips thrust assertively out onto the floor, while the horizontal band collapses in post-coital exhaustion.

The preoccupation with the body that has been a central concern of art in the 1980s and 1990s is already evident in these works of the 1960s and '70s. What is particularly striking is the discretion of the felt works—their subtle balance between figuration and abstraction, between insistence and understatement. They look forward not so much to the explicit sexual meditations of Matthew Barney and Cindy Sherman as to the subtle play between flesh and material in the work of Janine Antoni and Byron Kim. In other works, Morris has been as "sensational" as any artist on view in New York today; in the felt works, he demonstrates the expressive power of indirection.

