

Barry Le Va, *Distribution Piece*, detail, ca. 30 x 60 x 65', 1967-68.



## **BARRY LE VA: Distributional Sculpture**



## JANE LIVINGSTON

Within a two and a half year period, from early 1966 to the present, Barry Le Va's art has traced out a personal stylistic history of extraordinary repleteness. If his assumptions and terms are problematical and sometimes difficult to accept, they are eminently worth examining. In defining Le Va's stylistic progression, several factors which evolved simultaneously must be considered: types of materials used, size and number of components, size of overall format, use of color, and approach to internal organization of parts. The successive decisions made with respect to each of these elements nearly always point to a gradually strengthening inclination toward a sense of impermanence and chaos, and a rapidly increasing sophistication in handling weighted groupings within a larger distributional scheme.

When Le Va first began making his "distributions," his primary material was usually canvas, cut and folded in various ways; with this he used, in varying combinations, wood, string, paper, vinyl and puzzle parts. All components in the works from this first series (1-6, 1966) were painted, partly with a view to minimizing the referential character of the raw materials by homogenizing their surface quality. #1 included three quilted, cushion-like objects, a few handfuls of yellow-painted puzzle parts, and a narrow, twenty foot strip of perforated vinyl, also painted yellow. #2 incorporated one large and about a dozen smaller square or rectangular pieces of canvas, creased or folded and painted white, red or grey; these were placed over the large, dark blue bed canvas in a rather self-consciously "random" manner, and, over all, yellow puzzle parts were strewn. Both these works had strong overtones of whimsy; both were more sculptural than painterly, in terms of bulk and organization, and both were at the same time so rudimentary and so tremulous as to be affecting in spite of themselves. They worked in ways that could not have been entirely intended — namely as objects faintly tinged with a genuinely unconscious wit, though the esthetic notions which interested Le Va (he was still in art school at the time, and receiving little encouragement) were not unsophisticated. (I have sometimes thought it is chiefly in contrast to these that the recent grey felt works seem so advanced.) #4 of this initial series had a quite different sort of playfulness, as well as considerable abstract decorative merit; it consisted of 114 pieces of folded yellow paper, disposed in a grid pattern with 6 or 19 to a row; each unit was placed arbitrarily within the prescribed scheme. This work represents a somewhat anomalous gesture in the context of the rest. It is the only one employing a rigidly ordered format.

Halfway through the 1966 series, Le Va abandoned the application of light and unstable colors in favor of basic complementaries; this made it easier to concentrate his actual and perceived esthetic decisions on aspects of configuration and

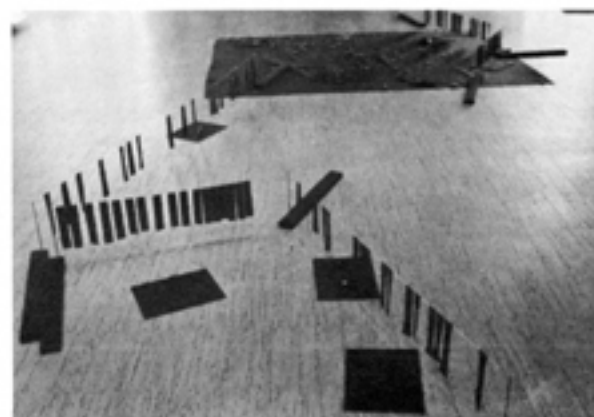
disposition of parts rather than on an arbitrary choice of colors. All the works in this series existed within an area of about 8 feet by 8 feet. In January of 1967, he enlarged his format to an approximately 15 by 15 foot area, and thus began a gradual movement away from rigorous spatial containment of compounded elements toward a spreading-out, and disintegration, of manifestly interconnected parts. The other major innovation at this time was the replacing of canvas by felt, enabling qualities of fluidity and casualness which were not possible with the stiffer fabric. His interest in attending to distributions as such, undistracted by weighted diversities in the components' shapes, textures, etc., is reflected at this time in his substitution of metal ball bearings for the previously un-uniform small objects. (The ball bearings turned out to be an unsatisfactory solution, being even less neutral against the soft forms than the puzzle parts, for example, and seeming to be placed there as a sort of didactic conceit or superfluous afterthought.)

The disturbing gratuitousness of Le Va's use of ball bearings in conjunction with cloth is plainly evidenced in his *Streamer Piece* of early 1967. In this work, a large rectangular piece of blue felt, several smaller squares of green felt and 8 blue, upholstered segments shaped as flattish, narrow boxes were distributed in an open configuration on the floor. Thirty or 40 ball bearings lay atop the felt pieces. Wires, tracing a five-sided zigzag pattern, were suspended twelve inches above the floor, establishing a linear continuity among the scattered components beneath; suspended from the wires were short streamers of red felt, spaced intermittently. *Streamer Piece* is one of the least schematically ambiguous and thus easiest of the distribution pieces; it is, in fact, all too accountable on every level. The vertical lines of streamers emerged somewhat interestingly as tenuous planes fencing off spatial areas, independent of their correspondence to the objects grouped beneath, but it was not enough a sustaining, or, one felt, entirely culminated device (practically or conceptually) to be considered as more than a diversionary episode in the whole context of the artist's development. With the completion of this and another work incorporating rolled felt, piled and strewn streamers and ball bearings (#7, 1967), color was eliminated altogether and replaced by black and/or grey. #8 and #9, 1967, employed felt cut in sizes ranging from particles to large sheets, rolled or "dropped" in roughly rectangular or square formats, respectively. Ball bearings were reintroduced into #10; this piece was larger than the previous ones, measuring about 25 by 25 feet.

#11, 1967, though awkward and not fully resolved (or, in the context of the artist's aims, not sufficiently *unresolved*), signifies the real beginning of that body of work which marks Le Va as an artist of undeniable importance. In it, he departed somewhat from a floor-oriented format by

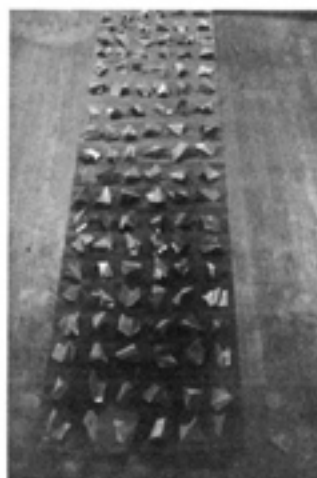


Barry Le Va, #2, 1966, m/m, 8' x 8' x 5", 1966.



Barry Le Va, *Streamer Piece*, m/m, 10' x 20' x 12", 1967.





Barry Le Va, #4, 1966, m/m, 12' x 20", 1966.



Barry Le Va, #10, 1967, m/m, 20 x 25', 1967.



Barry Le Va, #10, 1967, m/m, 20 x 25', 1967. (detail.)

hanging a 6 by 12 foot piece of black felt from two points on adjacent walls; he cut the material in the center and allowed it thus to sag deeply in curved planes toward the floor, folding over itself. Placed flat beneath it, and projecting outward from against the draped cloth was a fairly large rectangular section of black felt; scattered in heaps or singly around and on top of this were numerous black strips and a few rectangles, arranged in a clinging, straggling pattern which thinned out as it moved away from the "core," where the main vertical and horizontal components met. Standing to the left as one faced the work, counter to the preponderant concentration of matter, was a 20 by 4 inch felt-covered block. Creating a separate, related distributional layer were a few dozen ball bearings, scattered loosely over the large felt sheets and in discrete clusters on the bare floor. The strong sense in this work of the small pieces as *debris* (this becomes more and more pronounced henceforth) accounted, along with the absence of color, for its stark presentness, its overcoming of decorativeness, artiness, and whimsy. Nevertheless, there was unnecessary conflict between the elements of interior structuralization of parts (two- and three-dimensional) versus the all-over, silhouette-like articulation of a unified distributional concept. (In succeeding works, Le Va resolved this duality by flattening, enlarging and increasing the number of small components in each work; consequently the question of *distribution* [for him embodying a conception of randomness] overrides that of purposive structuring of parts.)

Simultaneously, with the early 1967 distribution pieces, Le Va was working on a set of "fold studies," with ten uniform pieces of grey felt, folded in varying ways and set in shallow trays. There is a distinct relationship between these and Robert Morris's 1968 folded felt pieces, though for Le Va they arose out of and pointed to very different esthetic concerns than those which inform Morris's work as a whole. Le Va, using cloth, had long before stripped out of it every corporealizing element — armature, padding, seams — and permitted the material to function integrally but without necessarily making a statement about its deconstructing integrity. Morris, on the other hand, became interested specifically in the softness of felt for reasons having to do, for example, with the hardness or rigidity of metal, concrete, etc. In some ways Morris's placing of a rectangular, folded piece of grey felt on the floor seemed to be a gesture which, in the framework of his overall development, almost had to be an isolated one. Basically, even using a single component rather than multipart format, Le Va continued in the fold series to concern himself with distributive relationships (fold to fold, line to line) or, more generally, with means of achieving accidental-seeming configurations.

After #11, 1967 — and perhaps partially due to his fold experiments — Le Va turned to using



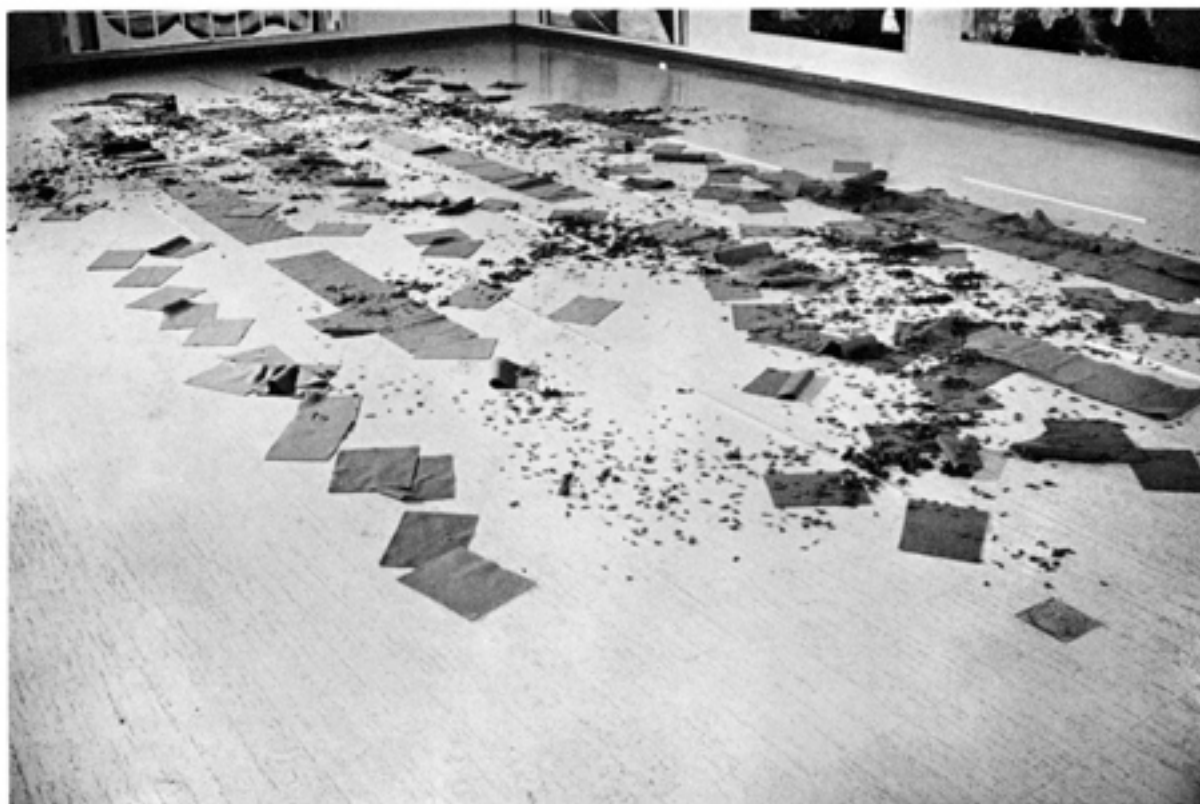
grey felt exclusively and eliminated the ball bearings, which he felt, especially in combination with black, had imparted a certain undesired elegance. In successive works, aluminum rods, about a yard long, were used together with massive areas of grey felt particles and larger square or rectangular segments of felt. Corresponding to a vast increase in size (up to 30 by 65 feet) and number of components came a greatly increased distributional complexity, and at the same time a more coherent tension between the accidental-appearing and clearly organized passages within a given work. The floor itself, both as base and non-base for the work, and the fact of environmentalist scale suddenly became crucial.

The criteria used in planning the largest floor pieces (which are initially worked out on paper) are relatively simple. There are two basic determining factors — number of components (and ratios of large to small felt pieces, and aluminum rods to felt), and a modular system by which a given set of parts is multiplied two, three or four times to fit a specified area. Certain geometric relationships are plotted out (most apparently in the late 1967 work in which long bands of felt and rods were placed in straight, parallel lines, less discernibly in following pieces), and the particles and some larger components are arranged in an improvised manner around these. A sense of movement, or flow, as if arrested in the process of change, becomes more and more pronounced in later works.

Le Va's stated objective in maintaining certain obvious geometric relationships is to elucidate first the elementary concept that, whether "random" or "orderly," a *distribution* is defined as "relationships of points and configurations to each other," or, concomitantly, "sequences of events." Beyond this, he wishes each work to "transcend its first appearance of disorder to another level of order. . . . When chance methodology is used extensively enough it does not necessarily produce a disorderly or accidental-appearing distribution."

In a particular sense, the formal problems that have interested Le Va in his recent works are more akin to those of some post-Cubist painting than to environmental sculpture, in that what is most critical in these works is the two-dimensional ordering of parts, distributed within and relating to a set edge. That the ground is horizontal rather than vertical, that the parts are rearrangeable, and that elements both of topography and "literalist space" enter in, do not alter this fact. Paradoxically, as Le Va's work became less decorative and less "pictorial," it also became closer, in terms of flat design, to some abstract painting, though this affinity is clearer in photographs than in actual confrontation.

One of the most controversial aspects of Le Va's recent works, and what strikes one most immediately on seeing them in the flesh, is the question of rearrangeability. It should first be emphasized



Barry Le Va, *Distribution Piece*, m/m, 1967.



Barry Le Va, *Distribution Piece*, m/m, 1967. (detail.)



that the works are not meant to be shuffled around or played with by the spectator; but neither are they intended to be physically inaccessible to him. By the extremely flexible and portable nature of the materials used, this very accessibility suggests the likelihood of physical disruption. The more significant issues are to what degree each work is rearrangeable by the artist each time it is set up, and how nearly the pieces in a set work must remain as originally positioned by the artist, in order to still constitute the work of art he intended. Le Va ordinarily works only from a very rough diagram. The only firmly preestablished dicta for a given work are the number and nature of components, the size of the area in which they are to be distributed and, usually, a predrawn but violable plan indicating prescribed locations for the largest elements. Because of this lack of a comprehensive diagrammatic scheme according to which the work can be set up in the artist's absence, the answer to the first question is that, theoretically, there are no absolutely binding criteria by which any one work must be consistently laid down. In practice, the artist adheres rather closely to his initial plan each time he repositions a specific work. As to the extent that a work can be disrupted by the spectator as he walks through it, and yet maintain its original integrity, this is an issue that does not particularly concern the artist (though he insists that the works are not about "spectator participation") — and thus it must be assumed that, short

of radical or plainly intentional disarrangement, a considerable degree of disruption is permitted. There are, then, two aspects of chance occurrence implicit in these pieces — on the one hand fortuitous-seeming static distribution, and, on the other, the element of unpredictable change coming into play after the work has left the hand of the artist.

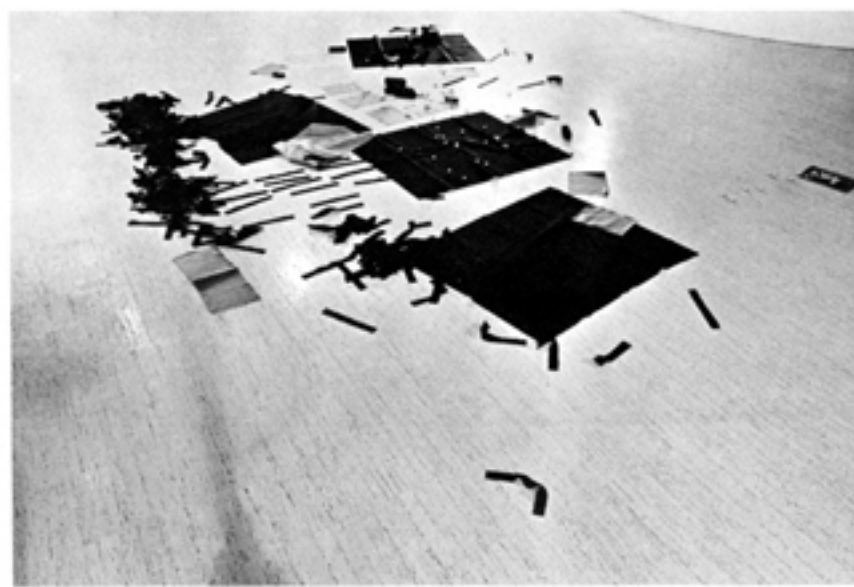
The semantical problems inherent in Le Va's, or anyone's, claims to deal with an "esthetic of randomness" are serious; there are also problems of another kind, arising out of the viewer's encounter with the situation the artist presents, apart from his ideated objective. First, if one attempts logically to define what it is that is meant in this instance by randomness, it becomes evident that we are treating the concept here only in the vaguest way, and that chaos, because it more clearly denotes "lack of order," or "lack of structure," might be a better term to apply. (With respect to Le Va's distributions, there is no workable definition of order that can be set in opposition to randomness.) One's perceiving of the art work as being chaotic seems to depend upon two determinants: that it is large enough so that it cannot be seen in entirety from any single internal position; and that one is immanently aware that his own movements as he walks through it will cause the configuration of parts to shift, and that, short of deliberate and radical "damage," these disruptions will not significantly alter the sense of the whole. Whether owing to an innate or con-

ditioned response, people are noticeably uncomfortable in the midst of these accumulations of debris. (One person, after having watched Le Va set up a piece on the floor of his gallery, asked him, "What do we do now? Sweep it up?")

In the last analysis, the viability of Le Va's work seems in large part to depend on whether it is enough simply to explore the abstract concept of "randomness" (chaos), or whether such a concept is by itself esthetic. The paradoxes involved when one attempts to demonstrate the look of "random ordering" of increments have absorbed many artists over this century; George Brecht has noted that, "It is not intuitively obvious that strict randomness is difficult to achieve . . ." Jackson Pollock, of course, brought the question of accidental imagery into full esthetic consideration, though his paintings work on other levels to transcend the mere fact of chance procedure in a way that Le Va's distributions don't. The latter's progressive elimination of referential or individually evocative elements (color, sculptural shape, etc.) on the one hand, and overall expansion and multiplication of parts on the other, tend toward an increasingly specific emphasis on the evocation of chaos. What happens to the spectator's perceived relationship to his environment when it is made to appear chaotic in one degree or another is the essence of what Le Va's recent work is about; all other issues are residual. Whether the experience offered is felicitous or not, it is revelatory. ■



Barry Le Va, *Distribution Piece*, detail, ca. 30 x 60 x 65", 1967-68.



Barry Le Va, #9, 1967, m/m, 18 x 20', 1967.