



The Collapse of Postmodernism 1993

NEW WORK BY ELLEN K. LEVY: THE COLLAPSE OF POSTMODERNISM

WE DO NOT NEED TO KNOW THE THEME OF ELLEN LEVY'S latest paintings to admire their visual intrigue, the intricate confluence of exterior and interior spaces, the surging rhythms, the lively palette, and the pulsating lights and shadows. These powerful images with their monumental forms take possession of their space aggressively, their presence is demanding and unequivocal. Even without knowing the titles, it is clear that these pictures dramatize and investigate architectural form. Here and there, as if viewed from the vantage of a rooftop, the emphatic shapes of skyscrapers emerge.

For her theme Levy takes the collapse under heavy snow of the Hartford Civic Center roof the night of January 18, 1978. It was less than one week later that I first met the artist and began to follow her development. In her rather spare paintings, she was already concerned with structures. She was exploring the similarities and transformations of spiral forms in biological objects such as shells and skulls, influenced by D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form*, a book that also attracted an earlier generation of artists including Jackson Pollock and Tony Smith. Although Levy soon shifted from biological forms to focus on man's interaction with the titanic forces of nature through technology, science has remained central to her art.

The collapse of the roof in Hartford caught Levy's eye. She clipped and saved a photograph, which lay dormant until this past year. In the meantime other themes engaged her. She drew inspiration from astronomical observatories, the space shuttle, dams, flood simulation experiments, and scientific catastrophe models. In 1985, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) commissioned her to produce a work based on the launch of the space shuttle *Atlantis*. Just months later, she reacted to the shock of the *Challenger* disaster in January 1986 by spontaneously creating images that evoke the loss.

Levy's fascination with calamity actually began years before. Among her earliest preserved work is a remarkably competent oil painting entitled *The Fall of the Walls of Jericho* which she made at the age of eleven. Already riveted by the idea of collapse, the young artist depicted human vulnerability in the face of uncontrollable force. In the biblical story, which she learned in Sunday School, the best technology fails. The walls come tumbling down as a result of divine intervention.

Architectural structures engage Levy not least because she perceives them as vulnerable. As her thinking developed, Levy came to see technology as a possible defense against such massive and unpredictable threats. In her most recent paintings, however, she dwells again on technology's failures: now she exorcises the danger by exerting control over its image.

LEVY EARLY ACQUIRED A KEEN SENSE OF DANGER. One of her first memories is that of a close call: a New York City fireman carrying her out a window and down the fire escape of a burning apartment building. Years later when she was studying art in Boston, a fire in her apartment brought back the primal terror of her childhood. She

remembers that the Boston fire caused her floor to collapse into the apartment below and that the landlord left the hole gaping unrepaired for months. Curiously, she has painted floods, collapses, explosions, but never fire.

In choosing her current theme, Levy once again explores catastrophe. She does not relish disaster, but is drawn to events where there has been a narrow escape. Their outcome might then be seen as reassuring. It was night when the fourteen-hundred tons of the Hartford roof gave way and the ten-thousand-seat building was empty.

Just before Levy turned to the actual debacle in Hartford, she conducted a series of experiments with theoretical models of catastrophe. Employing Complexity Theory she worked in her studio with domino models subjecting various forms of visual order to simulated situations that were potentially catastrophic. It was from this theoretical, distanced, inquiry that she returned to focus once again on a specific event.

Before her theoretical foray, Levy spent much of the last decade exploring ideas for architectural monuments that she viewed as expressions of technological progress. Most of the structures that appealed to her were utopian: their visionary forms were never built. She looked closely at projects of the French architects Etienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicholas Ledoux from the eighteenth century and, from the early twentieth-century, at the *Monument to the Third International* by the Russian Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin. The temporary Glass Pavilion designed by the German Expressionist Bruno Taut for the 1914 Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne so affected her that not only did she study it, she imagined and depicted its destruction. She also found especially suggestive Taut's other imaginary crystalline creations and his apocalyptic vision.

From fascination with projects that could not be built, Levy turned naturally to the Hartford collapse. Beyond the stunning visual spectacle and emotional impact, her interest fastened on the fact that the engineers relied on computer modeling to overcome what they saw as the limitations of traditional technology and hands-on experience. Their attitude struck her as significant for her own work. For Levy, design in painting is just as important as an architect's plan for a building. However, the composition is not just theoretical. The artist must rely on her own well-tested instincts, on her familiarity with her craft, on the spontaneous adjustments that she makes in the studio.

The weight of the roof's collapse causes an implosion, a violent compression of volume, which Levy represents as a bursting inward into the imagined space of the painting. Most often she chooses a point of view looking down into the collapse, a space at once the black hole of urban decay, a wound in the flesh, the sublime void of Rothko's abstractions, an invisible, interiorized terrifying image. She skillfully employs color and texture to emphasize the chaotic vortex of the collapse. The area surrounding the implosion is often lighter, with rich pastel tonalities, while the darker, cooler colors recede into the depths of the collapse itself.

AT THE SAME TIME, LEVY IS FASCINATED BY TOPOLOGY, the mathematical theories concerned with the properties of geometric configuration which are unaltered by elastic deformations such as those caused by the implosion. "Collapsed forms allow you to see the original structures in a totally different light," she notes. What results is the unexpected arrangement of shapes that are most apparent in five vertical compositions, each an interior scene, in which an imaginary eye views the roof collapse from below, from within the space itself.

Levy painted all but two of her recent pictures in oil on wood panel, a firm surface support that she currently prefers. Her panel supplier could not keep pace with her exuberant inspiration and two paintings ended up painted over used canvas that she found in her studio. The wood surfaces, when integral to her design, are sometimes left bare in part, sometimes scraped and sanded. Ambiguities of perspective, scale, and surface are intentional. These paintings are looser in brushstroke, their forms more dynamic than ever before in her work.

In these pictures the powerful tension between representation and abstraction creates compelling ambiguity. This is what she intended, recalling the romantic painterly effects that Turner so masterfully achieved in his poignant depiction of *The Slave Ship*, a canvas in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts which Levy has long held in high esteem. There, too, man is subject to the indomitable forces of nature.

LEVY DRAWS UPON A RICH VARIETY OF SOURCES in creating the startling conceptions which fill the blank surface of her pictures: not just the actual image of the Hartford Civic Center, but forms from the roof top views of artists as diverse as Edward Hopper and the nineteenth-century German panorama painter Eduard Gaertner. Levy also drew inspiration from Gordon Matta-Clark who actually split and photographed a New Jersey house in 1974. She has long admired the futuristic fantasies of the visionary Italian architect Antonio Sant'Elia and of Fritz Lang's 1926 film *Metropolis*.

For Levy, the failure of the Civic Center roof turned into an allegory for the collapse of Postmodernism "under the weight of theory." She sees a dismantling of the dominant contemporary ideology, a rebellion against authoritarian styles that value ideology over the craft of painting. Although she did not intend to produce an allegory, she admitted to feeling as if expected to paint with her hands tied behind her back. "One day I walked in and realized that it was the collapse of Postmodernism." Her account is reminiscent of Kandinsky's sudden discovery of abstraction when by chance he glimpsed one of his own paintings turned upside down on his easel. Levy insists that painting has to deliver "content" (significant meaning) as well as subject matter, color, form, and the potential for illusion. To her, much of the formalism of the last decade seems merely decorative, producing trivial work. Her paintings provide the viewer with a welcome respite from so much recent fashion; they offer both brilliant visual phenomena and significant intellectual content.

The mingling of conceptual and formal in Mark Tansey's work strikes Levy as provocative. In her own work,



Collapse and Reconfiguration #1 1993

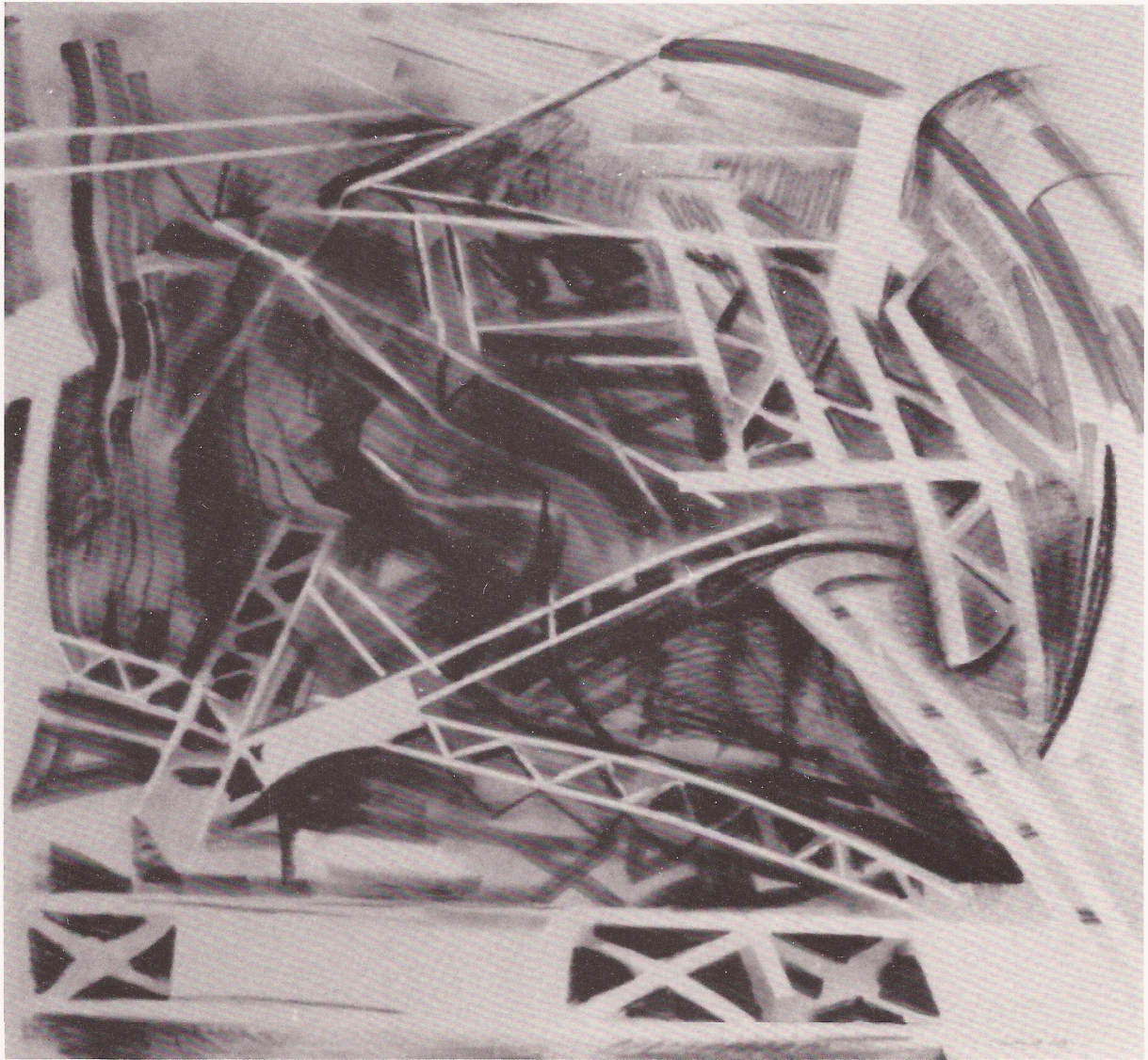


Collapse and Reconfiguration #2 1994

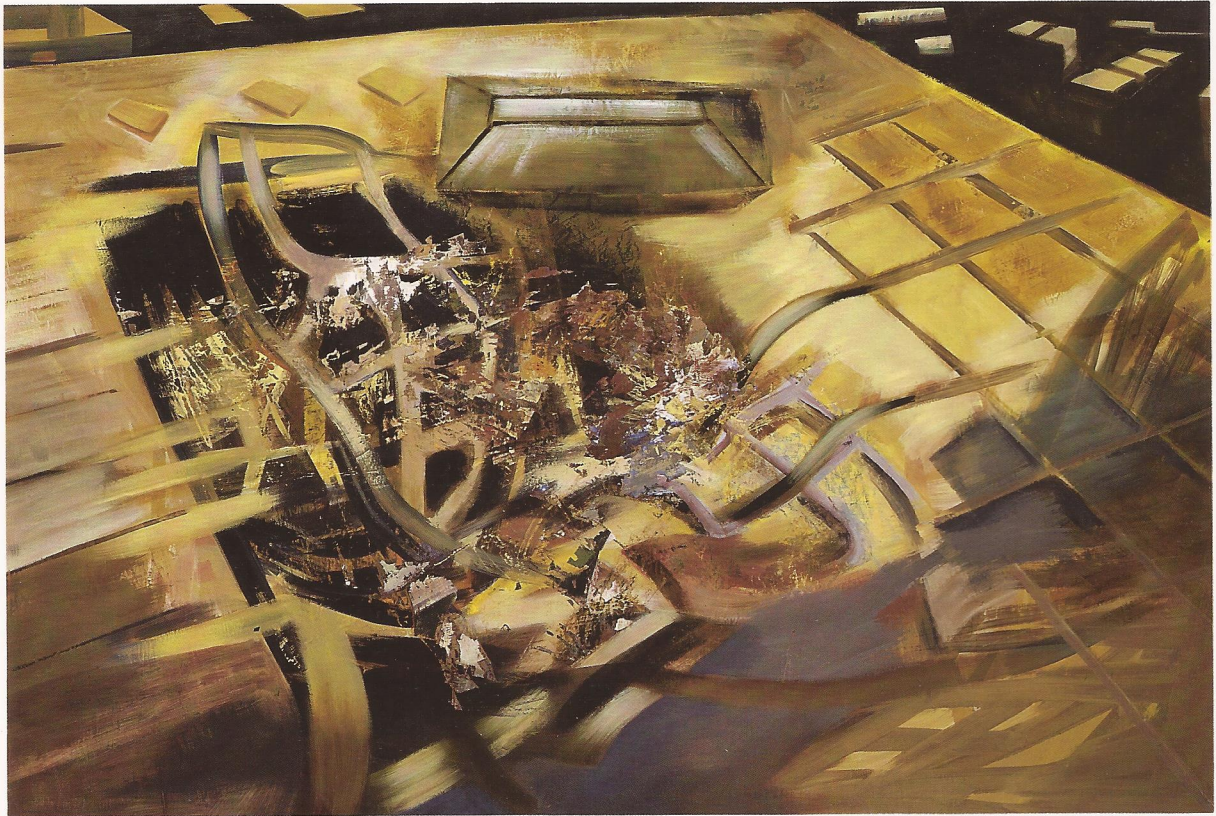
however, she does not want her sub-text (the collapse of Postmodernism under the weight of theory) to dominate. Nor will she allow her paintings to become illustrative. Instead, she seeks to combine the intellectual rigor of conceptual art with the painterly qualities of Caravaggio whose work she finds extraordinarily fresh. She aims to strike a delicate balance between figurative and abstract art, "to achieve a rebounding of associations." She is intrigued by the work of both Frederick Kiesler and Alfred Jensen, each of whom devised a particular system to express his own world view.

Levy's paintings not only interpret the collapse of a roof, they incorporate a history of recent art. She absorbs the structured grids of Minimalism, the chaotic painterly brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionism, as well as strange trapezoidal forms right out of one of Hopper's realist rooftops. She sees the area where she depicts the collapse itself as a "reference to site-specific sculpture where the work merges with its setting." For her, the place of decay, the ruin, is a kind of *memento mori*, a meditation on the transience of life. The theme of an actual event enables the pictures to enter the world of reality. A palpable tension between forms and their identity, according to Levy, prevents "closure into what is totally known."

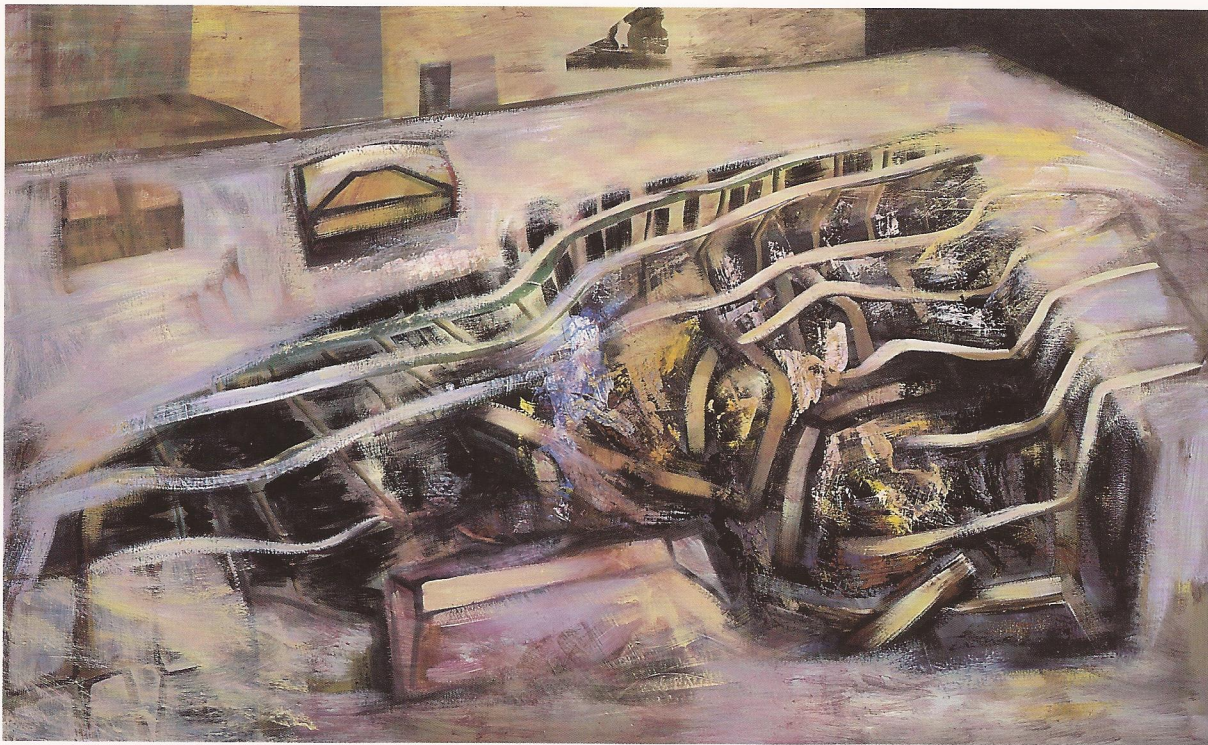
Levy's penetrating intelligence, informed by her ardent engagement with science, mathematics, and technology, works well with her aesthetic concerns. Her singular mind (with its ever surprising twists of logic), her eye for subtleties of form and nuanced color, and her indomitable energy result in paintings which stand out for their visual intensity. These latest pictures reflect the violent, chaotic, urban world that noisily intrudes upon her thoughts in her New York studio. But they represent chaos distilled into a lyrical vision, an intimate flirtation with danger ultimately eluded, a poetic rendering of destruction, observed but not endured.



Study: Challenger 1986



The Collapse of Postmodernism/The Collapse of the Hartford Roof 1993



Collapse, Configuration and Redundancy #1 1993



Ellen K. Levy as NASA artist: Reloading near the Crawler Transporter at the Kennedy Space Center, November 25, 1985

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Born in New York City

Lives and works in New York City; conducted workshops at The Montclair Art Museum

Education

Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts

BA in Zoology

Boston Museum School of Fine Arts, Massachusetts

Diploma in Painting on Mary O.H. Longstrath Scholarship

Selected One-Person Exhibitions

- 1995 Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series, New Brunswick, NJ
- 1994 Chapel Art Center (formerly Galerie Keeser), Hamburg, Germany
- 1993-94 Galerie Wild, Frankfurt, Germany
American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, DC
- 1993 Drew University, Madison, NJ
- 1991 Galerie Henn, Maastricht, The Netherlands
- 1990-91 Galerie Keeser-Bohbot, Hamburg, Germany
- 1990 Galerie Zindel-Grabner, Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany
- 1989 American Cultural Center, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Israel
- 1987 Museum of Art, Science and Industry, Bridgeport, CT
- 1985 National Academy of Sciences, Washington, DC
- 1984 Galerie Geilsdoerfer, Cologne, Federal Republic of Germany
Columbia University, NYC
New York Academy of Sciences, NYC
- 1982 55 Mercer Street Gallery, NYC
Baruch College, NYC
- 1978 Bertha Urdang Gallery, NYC

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1995 American Center, Paris, France
- 1994 Stephen Rosenberg Gallery, NYC
Trans Hudson Gallery, Jersey City, NJ
East Connecticut State University, Williamantic
- 1993 The Drawing Center, NYC
- 1992-93 Galerie Wild, Frankfurt, Germany
- 1992 Arco, Madrid, Spain
Trenkmann Gallery, NYC



From left to right: **Interior Implosion #6** 1993; **Study: Interior Implosion #3** 1994;
Study: Interior Implosion #4 1994; **Study: Interior Implosion #5** 1994

- 1990-91 FIAC, Paris, France
 1990 Katonah Museum, NYC
 1988-90 Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, "Visions of Flight," NASA Collection
 Museums Tour
 1988 Squibb Gallery, Princeton, NJ
 Bergen Museum of Art and Science, Paramus, NJ
 1986 Kennedy Space Center, Cocoa Beach, FL
 The Montclair Art Museum, NJ
 1985-86 Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
 Paul Klein Gallery, Chicago, IL
 1985 The Bronx Museum of the Arts, NYC
 1984 The Newark Museum, NJ
 1982-88 A.I.R. Gallery, NYC
 1981 The Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY
 Leo Castelli Gallery, NYC (benefit)
 The Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, NYC
 Marion Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
 1979 New Jersey State Museum, Trenton
 Henri Gallery, Washington, DC
 1978 & 79 Bertha Urdang Gallery, NYC

Honors

NASA Commission to create work based on the November 1985 launch of the Space Shuttle *Atlantis*
 Tiffany Foundation Fellowship Nominee, 1985

Selected Publications

- 1994 Vernissage Galerie Wild, Frankfurt, Germany
 1994 & 87 Artist's Articles, *Leonardo*, "Complexity" 27:75; "Visualizing Evolution" 20(1):3-8
 1992 & 91 *Art Journal*, "The Consumption of Paradise" 51(2):54; "The Technological Muse" 50(2):75-77
 1990 "The Technological Muse," Katonah Museum
Hamburger Abendblatt, Sep 5, p s.13
 West German Radio Interview, Sep 5
Der Tagesspiele, Berlin, Jun 6
 Curator and Writer, "Natural History Recreated," *Center Quarterly*, #51 Vol.11 (4):4-10
 1989 *Jerusalem Post Entertainment Magazine*, Sep p 16
 1988,87,85 *Arts Magazine*, 63(4):109, Dec; 61(6):97, Feb; 60(4):100, Dec; 58(7):8, Mar;
 84,82&79 57(2):13, Oct; 53(6):23, Feb

- 1988 "Design Through Discovery," Holt, Reinhart & Winston
 1987 Cable News Network Interview, Aug 11
 1986 NY Cable Channel 6 Interview, Jan 18
 Artist's Article, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, "Monkey in the Middle: Pre-Darwinian Evolutionary Thought and Artistic Creation," 31(1):95-106
 1985 & 79 *The New York Times*, Jan 6 (Sun) p NJ-10; Nov 25 (Sun) p NJ-34
 1984 *The Star Ledger*, Nov 18 (Sun) p I-1; Dec 16 (Sun) p 4-13
Koelner Stadtanzeigen, Federal Republic of Germany, Sep 15
 West German Radio Interview, Sep 9
 1981 *Tosho Shimbun*, Tokyo Book Review, Sep 9, p 1K
 1979 *The Washington Star*, Jul 8 (Sun) p E-2
Artforum, 17(5):53-54, Jan

Selected Professional Activities

- 1995 Visiting Artist, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago
 1987 Moderator and Panelist, "Artists Speak on Art, Art and Technology: The Soul of the Machine"
 Panelist, New York State Association of Independent Schools and Packer Institute: "The Arts and Thinking"
 1986 Art Consultant, "Mathematics in Art — Art in Mathematics," Consortium for Educational Equity, Rutgers University, The Montclair Art Museum, Hoffman-La Roche
 Panelist, "Modern Arts and Modern Technologies," Society for the History of Technology Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, PA
 1985 Lecturer, Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Amherst, MA
 1984 Art and Science Symposium, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA

Selected Collections

Carnegie Associates
 Citicorp
 Forbes Collection
 IBM
 Mount Holyoke College Art Museum
 NASA
 The Newark Museum
 New Jersey State Museum
 The Prudential Insurance Company of America
 Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick
 Private Collections

THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are given in inches; height precedes width. All works lent by the artist unless otherwise noted.

Collapse and Reconfiguration #2 1994

oil on wood

72 x 72

Study: Interior Implosion #2 1994

mixed media on paper

72 x 36

Study: Interior Implosion #3 1994

mixed media on paper

72 x 36

Study: Interior Implosion #4 1994

mixed media on paper

72 x 36

Study: Interior Implosion #5 1994

mixed media on paper

72 x 36

Collapse and Reconfiguration #1 1993

oil on wood

72 x 72

Collapse, Configuration and Redundancy #1 1993

oil on canvas

48 x 72

The Collapse of Postmodernism 1993

oil on wood

72 x 72

The Collapse of Postmodernism/**The Collapse of the Hartford Roof 1993**

oil on wood

48 x 72

Interior Implosion #6 1993

oil on wood

72 x 36

Synthetic Thunder #8 1992

oil on wood

72 x 36

New Jersey State Museum Collection

Anonymous Gift

FA1993.8

Study: Challenger 1986

mixed media on paper

45 x 45

NEW WORK BY ELLEN K. LEVY



The Collapse of Postmodernism

New Jersey State Museum

Division of the Department of State