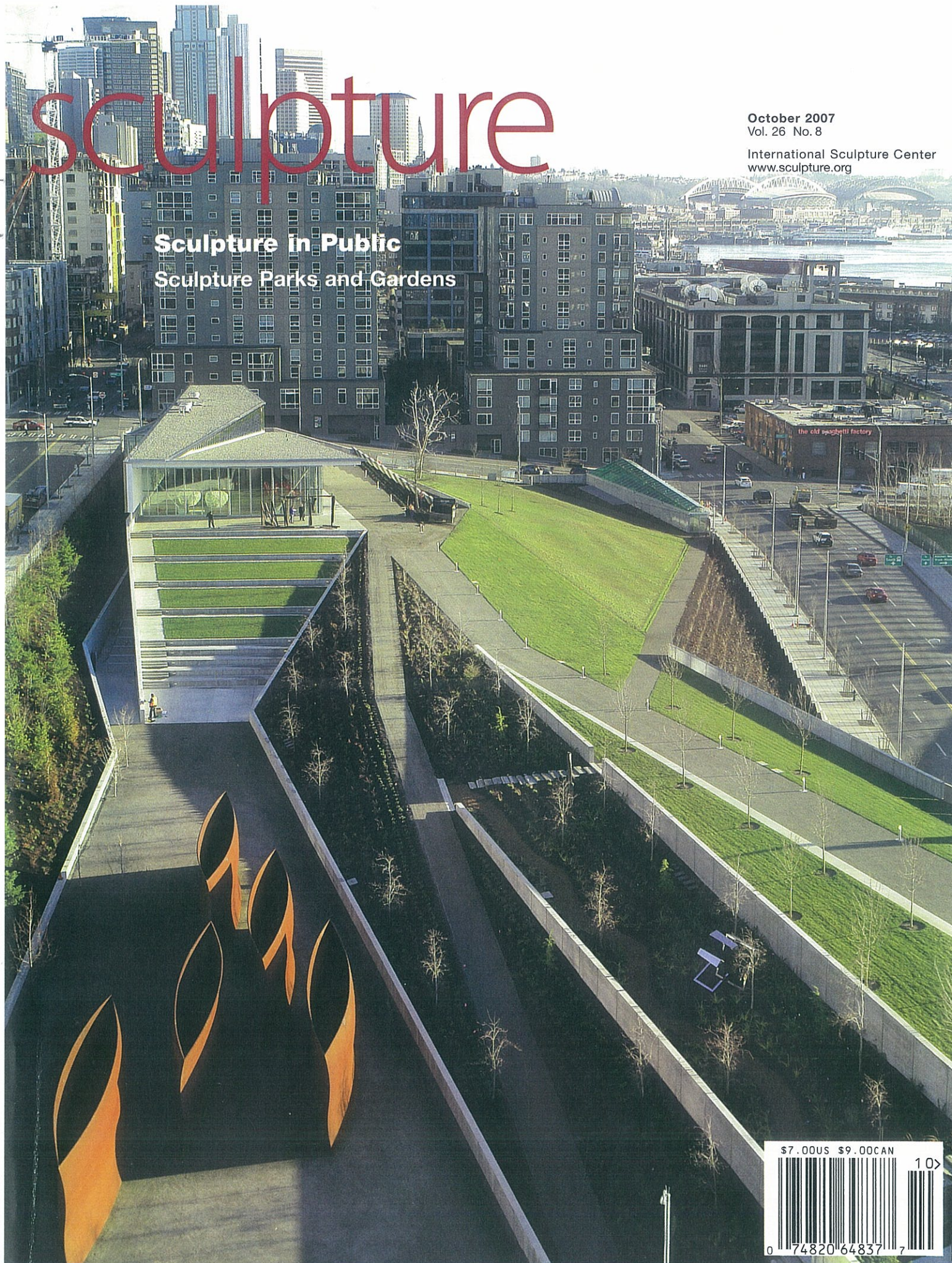


# sculpture

October 2007  
Vol. 26 No. 8

International Sculpture Center  
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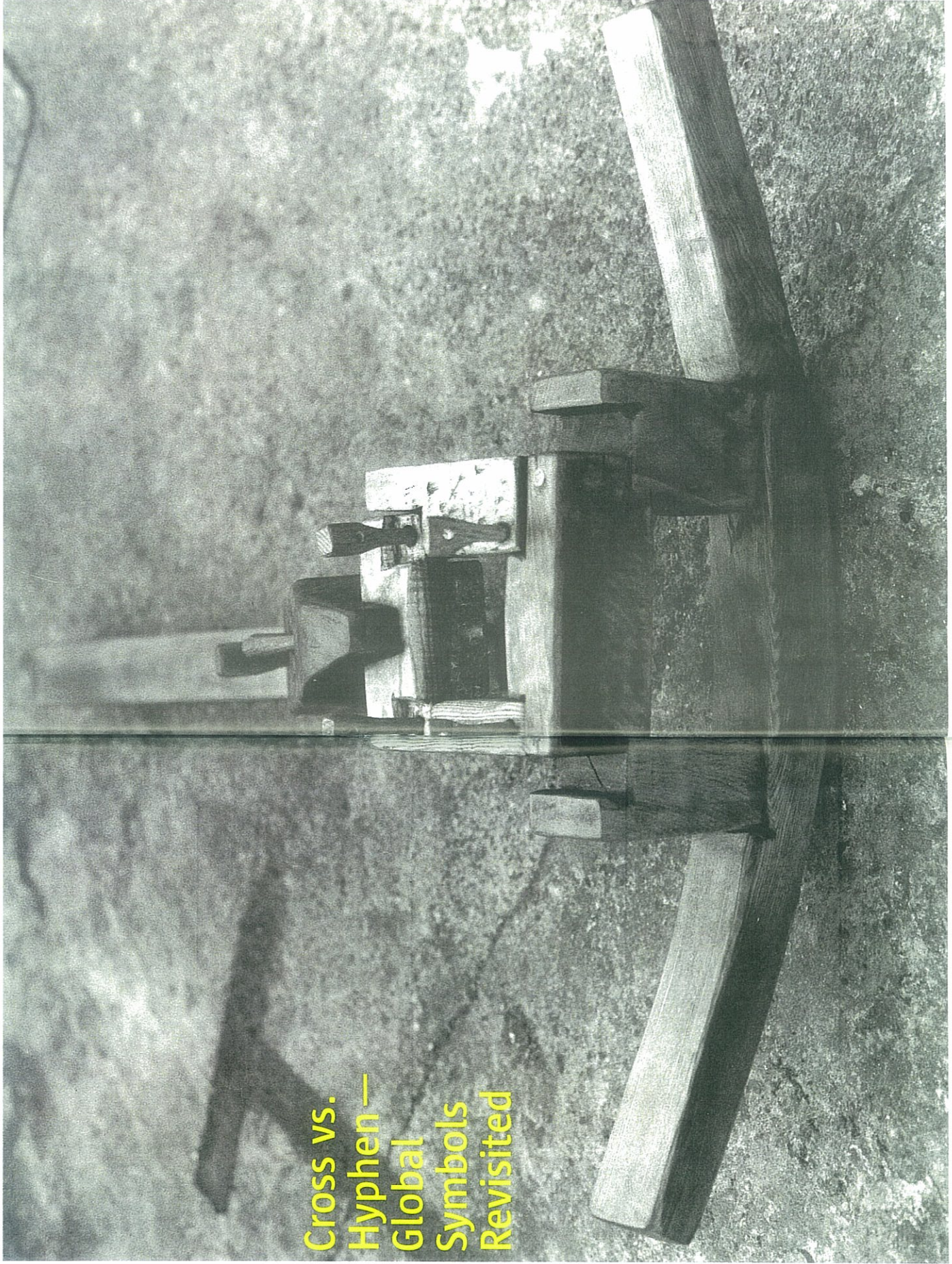


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# Paul Neagu

Cross vs.  
Hyphen—  
Global  
Symbols  
Revisited



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Edge Runner, 1983. Mahogany  
and ash.

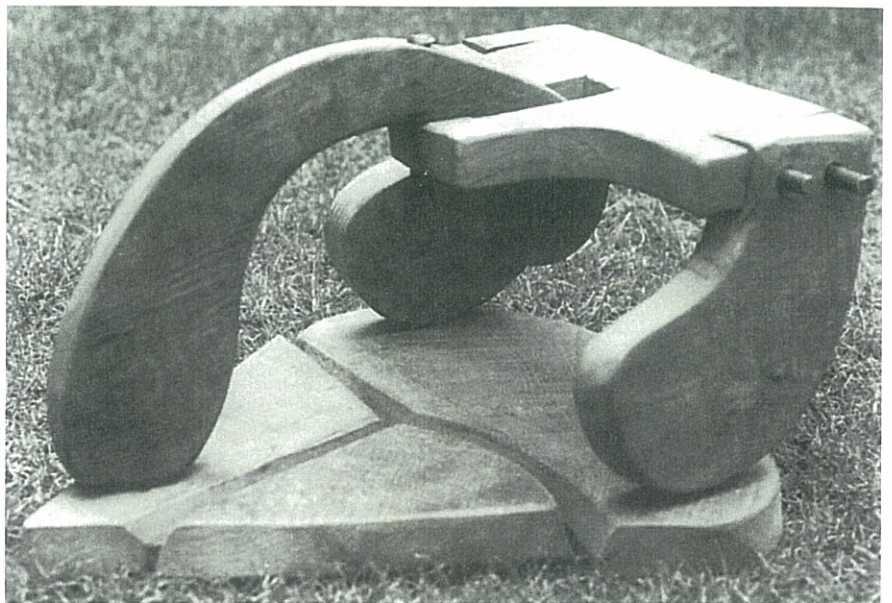
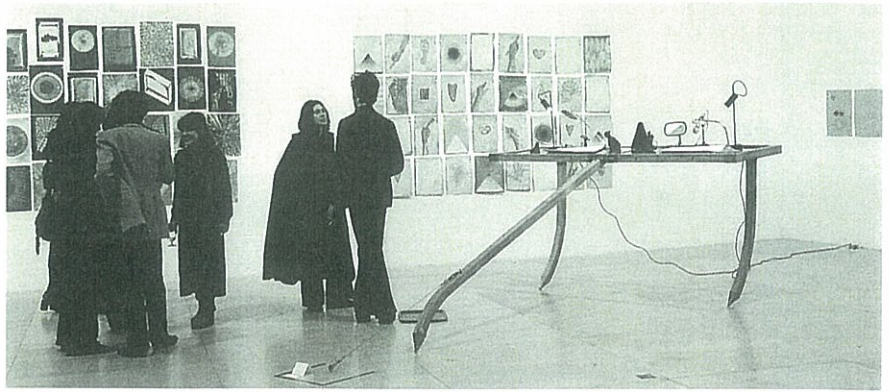


BY MATEI STIRCEA-CRACIUN

Sooner or later, anyone approaching Paul Neagu's sculpture is bound to experience the challenge of his *Hyphens*. The prototype resembled an unconventional workbench or an easel for making objects or drawings. It was first exhibited in 1975 at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, where it generated much attention and curiosity. After that, the artist's destiny changed. As if obsessed with the idea of his *Hyphen* being analogous to creation, he re-created the image in hundreds of drawings and scores of sculptural variations. For more than three decades, Neagu returned tirelessly to the theme of the three-legged table. His early variations, which were made in wood, show evident phallic properties. Using a subtle, playful approach, he alludes to the simple idea of the phallus as a coupling feature, a hyphen between two material entities. Subsequent *Hyphen* compositions tap into the immediacy of everyday motifs to recall a heart, a skull, a tractor, a building, a vehicle.

Uncommon malleability is an intended structural attribute in the *Hyphens*. Apparently, Neagu was less interested in creating one specific shape than in establishing a "shape engine," somewhat similar to the "engines" used in Internet systems. It seems that he uses the *Hyphen* idea to locate significant shapes. "Descriptively, a hyphen-prototype," he explains, "is a rectangle kept in mid-air by two parallel legs bent like hooks. A third leg—a ramp-like shaft—which is both longer and diagonal, meets the rectangle in opposition to the other two. The most subtle aspect of the 'hyphen prototype' is an inherent (formally implied) need for a third level of form: a circle, a spiral, or a sphere."<sup>1</sup>

So, the *Hyphens* bridge together simple geometric shapes like triangles and rectangles. However, Neagu warns viewers that "a third level of form" is needed to render the module complete. Yet, the circle/spiral/sphere is not required in terms of harmonic rules. The third level of form doesn't concern aesthetics but is intended as an intellectual attribute. In some installations,



Top: Neagu and his Generative Art Group with the first *Hyphen*—*The Subject Generator*, Oxford Museum of Modern Art, 1975. Above: *Hyphen on Elm*, 1984. Wood, steel and rod, 33 x 47 x 51 cm.

Neagu paints a circle on the gallery floor and sets a *Hyphen* inside, thereby assisting viewers to perceive the "missing element."

Neagu embraced the *Hyphen* as a personal discovery, seeing it as the fulcrum of his contemplation of shape.<sup>2</sup> To a printer's eye, a hyphen is equivalent to a segment of a straight line. Perhaps the artist deliberately created this sculptural metaphor of a "minimal unit." A drawing in *statu nascendi* is but a segment of a line, a hyphen, and from this minimal unit, drawing can accomplish any configuration. Perhaps this explains why, to Neagu, a hyphen is not merely a two-dimensional line but a virtual body, a three-dimensional network of potentially complicated harmonious and/or conflicting relationships.

While made up of elementary geometric configurations, a hyphen is potentially able to represent any aspect of existence. A reductive representation of objects through a combination of elementary shapes can

result in patterns becoming ambiguous and competing with one another. A skull, a heart, a tractor suddenly look alike. Meanings tend to converge, images become fluid and connect into continuous flows, as in a musical phrase, to the point where the distinction between subject and object is eventually eroded.

In the catalogue *Endlessege Hyphen, Sculpture as Evolving Archetype, 1975–1998*, Neagu presented about 70 works, each sharing the generic title *Hyphen*. The collection demonstrates his conception of the *Hyphen* as offering a route to an endless odyssey: *East-West Hyphen* (1975–77) is followed by *New York Hyphen* (1978), then by *Romania Hyphen* (1978), *Montreal Hyphen* (1983), and *Alaska Hyphen* (1984). Simultaneously Neagu used the *Hyphen* works to conjure a journey back in time, as in *Classic Hyphen* (1980), *Medieval Hyphen* (1977–89), and *Ancient Hyphen* (1997). He also conceived the module as suitable for



utilitarian applications, for example, gardening (*Hyphen for Garden*, 1976), shoemaking (*Shoemaker's Hyphen*, 1984), and architecture (*Archigram Hyphen*, 1997).

"The sculpture named *Hyphen*," Neagu writes, "is a connecting fulcrum in which material substance and symbolic geometry combine into bodies of generative sculpture."<sup>3</sup> With his stated interest in substances and materials, Neagu's tacit allegiance to Brancusi can be readily established. Brancusi explicitly recommended that the material "should not be subdued to satisfy preconceived ideas and forms. The material should suggest by itself the theme (of a composition) and its shape. And both of these have to come from within, not be imposed from the outside."<sup>4</sup>

Neagu experimented with a wide range of materials in developing the *Hyphens*. He moved from one type of wood to another, tested the different qualities of iron and steel, bronze and aluminum, and used combinations of leather, bone, and textiles. Donald Kuspit observed that "Neagu manipulates *Hyphen's* material endlessly, but the mystery of the form endures beyond its various materializations."<sup>5</sup>

Having defined a wholly abstract concept, the *Hyphen*, Neagu decided to develop a more intuitive, concrete elucidation. For him, the most obvious response was the insemination of abstraction into materials. Leaving the realm of mathematics to enter concrete reality requires an awareness of the materiality of this world. Neagu must have recognized the advantages of using materials as catalysts for his, as he called it, "generative" discourse, and he may have realized that there was a new, not immediately obvious dimension to this aesthetic decision. In sculpture and in painting, materials have always provided essential support for the transmission of ideas because they operate like innate metaphors of nature.

"When I started to meditate about the beauty of materials," Bachelard writes, "I was surprised to notice the striking absence of considerations on the material cause in the deliberations of writers in aesthetics. Talking about beauty and values without taking into account the beauty and value of a terrestrial material determination is

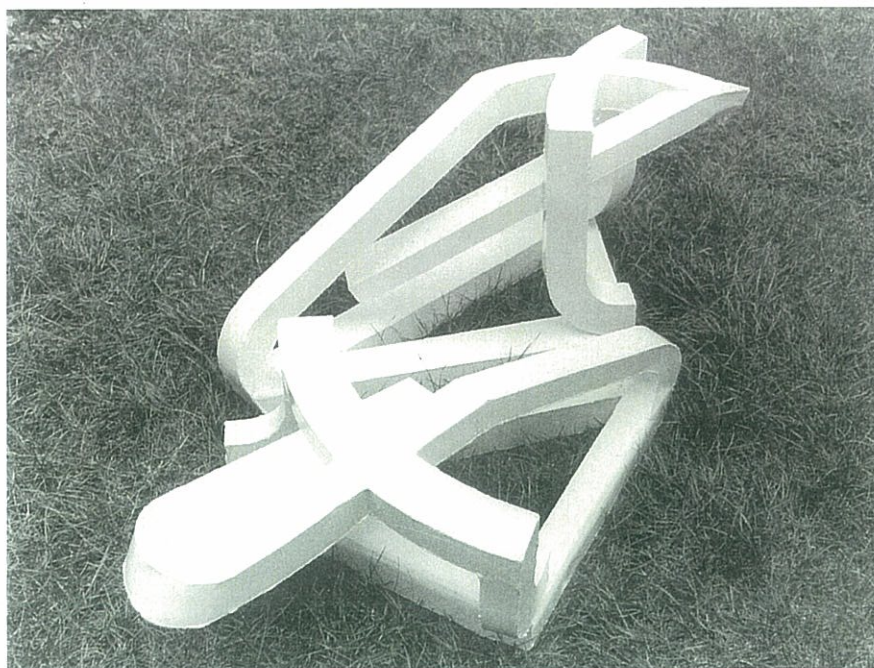
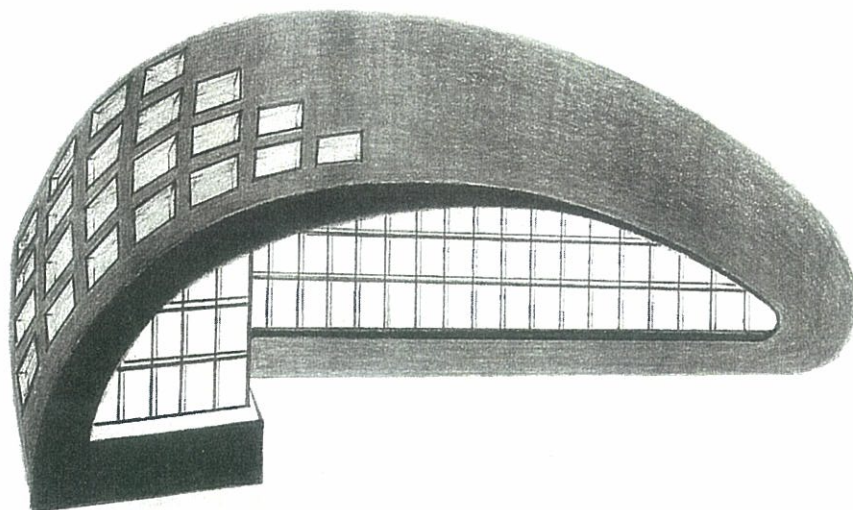
tantamount to asserting that they are universal"—which they are certainly not.<sup>6</sup>

Having retained their specific qualities for millennia, materials qualify as fixed points within culture at large. They are containers of cultural information. In the evolution of human thought, wood, stone, and earth have provided the source of the most reliable landmarks, and it may be safely anticipated that there are unlimited reserves of aesthetic vitality in the material messages of art,

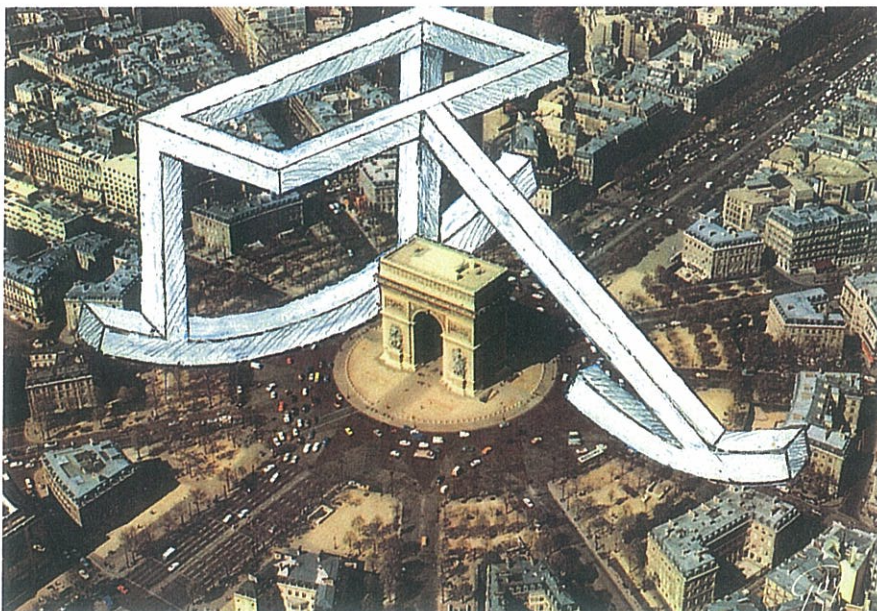
if only because human experience of materials is infinite.

Visual statements about the status of materials in Neagu's work are to be found less in individual compositions than in his cycles of sculpture. In *Nine Catalytic Stations* (1975–87), also dubbed "A tale of the spiral," the artist exalts material attributes within one of his most ambitious sculptural projects. Each *Catalytic Station* is intended as a sculptural metaphor for the human experience of iron.

Below: *Hyphen Upturned (Archigram)*, 1997. Pastel on paper. Bottom: *A-Cross*, 1980. Painted and welded iron, two-part work.







Above: *Imagined Edge Runner in Paris*, 1981. Photo drawing. Below: *Endlessedge Hyphen (TAO)*, 1999. Welded mild steel, 510 cm. high. Opposite: *Nine Catalytic Stations*, 1975–77. View of installation at Traquair House, Scotland, 1988.



This is strikingly the case with those stations that resemble a knife or plow, yet Neagu does not limit himself to focusing on recognizable objects. His interest is in commenting on how iron and its cutting standards impacted ways of thinking. For Neagu, *Hyphen* as sculptural form is “the materialization of an epistemological metaphor.”<sup>7</sup> It is a “sculptural tool” designed to create shapes but also, and more importantly, to probe knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Several *Catalytic Stations* suggest that iron implements may have spread standards of “penetrability” or “sharpness” or “rigor” that were later to contaminate abstract operations in the human mind. In others, Neagu goes so far as to discriminate a sequence of broad cultural models. It lies with the viewer to respond to the challenge and question the capacity of the *Stations* to resonate with European history (Hellenic culture and its dream of undivided harmony, the Middle Ages and its obsession with good and evil, modernity and its awareness of the polyvalent nature of truth).

Neagu’s compositions take abstract discourse to where it belongs. Richard Demarco, the Scottish artist, wrote, “I realized then that Paul Neagu had no intention of making art objects in any normal or acceptable sense to satisfy all those who believed in art for art’s sake. His objects resisted any nomenclature of art jargon. They resisted definition in merely aesthetic terminology. The objects in that room demanded to be considered as receptacles of a spiritual energy. They were containers re-organizing the European race memory.”<sup>9</sup> Neagu imagines a founding myth—a myth about the material essence of consciousness—and he dedicates it primarily to present-day Europe, as well as to other cultures around the world in a global perspective of reasserted confidence in human values.

Neagu probably imagined the spiral that inspired *Nine Catalytic Stations* as a tacit response to Barnett Newman’s *Stations of the Cross* (1958–66). While Newman uses the cross as a vertical bar linking earth to heaven, there is no horizontal crosspiece in any of his 14 *Stations*, which now hang in the National Gallery in Washington, DC.





In Newman's work, direct references to Christian tradition prevail. With Neagu, stress is laid on a para-mythological commentary. Certainly, *Nine Catalytic Stations* also alludes to the general motif of the Stations of the Cross, and more precisely, to the horizontal cross bar as distinct in its symbolic value from the vertical bar. Neagu not only splits the cross, but also discovers iron to be the material best suited to describe the specific story of the horizontal bar. This is the core idea behind the *Nine Catalytic Stations* cycle.

One day I was talking with a student about Neagu's work. I was praising his method and command of composition, adding that such achievements had to be explained by taking into account the extensive readings of an artist who, in his younger years, aspired to become a student in philosophy. Neagu claimed that he wanted his art to be "the most expressive of all

philosophies." The student interrupted me. Given his readings, he said, Neagu's indirect reference in *Nine Catalytic Stations* to the Stations of the Cross seemed somewhat out of focus with contemporary philosophical debates. With *Nine Catalytic Stations* crowning Neagu's lifelong effort to develop the symbol of the *Hyphen*, it becomes apparent that interpretations can hardly be restricted to geometric and material symbolism. The title of the cycle reveals the motif of the Stations of the Cross to have provided the reference point to Neagu's tale about the Stations of the *Hyphen*. He may have noticed the proximity of the two signs—a cross versus a hyphen (+/-)—by sheer accident and may have integrated it into his work alongside other late developments. However, another hypothesis seems more likely. Let us suppose that Neagu's whole work was predicated on a simple question: What becomes of the symbol of

the cross in a generation that has kept a distance from religious institutions? The answer seems obvious: once the vertical thrust toward the transcendent weakens, once the vertical bar of the cross clouds its meaning, the cross turns into a hyphen.

Neagu made it his vocation to give shape and meaning to the sign of the hyphen. In fact, his most valuable contribution was to succeed in turning it into a symbol addressed to the world at large and in creating the legend of the *Nine Catalytic Stations* to sustain it. In the end, he felt so close to his creation as to identify with it: "In writing, a hyphen binds two words together but also keeps them apart. The hyphen is something I carry with me. I am the hyphen."<sup>10</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Neagu, "Hyphen Maker," *Aspects*, 1979, nr. 6, page 8.

<sup>2</sup> "An early intuition called 'subject generator' was drafted, shifted, built, destroyed, and re-drawn hundreds of times...re-enforced, lost several times, refounded as fulcrum and meeting point between subject and object, as sculpture and idea. It rounds up the libido, ego and the self in one contemporary symbol." See Paul Neagu, *Hyphen (1975-1985), A Sculpture by Paul Neagu* (London: Visual Hermeneutics, 1985), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, page 19. See also Donald Kuspit, "Paul Neagu's Hyphen Sculptures," in *Paul Neagu, Endlessedge Hyphen, Sculpture as Evolving Archetype, 1975-1998*, exhibition catalogue, (London: Flowers East, 1998), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> M.M., "Constantin Brancusi, A Summary of Many Conversations," *The Arts*, July 1923, vol. IV, No. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Kuspit, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> See Bachelard's introduction to *L'eau et les rêves, Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1942). It goes without saying that on a different planet, with a different play of substances and materials, standards of value and beauty would be thoroughly different.

<sup>7</sup> Neagu, "Hyphen Maker," *op. cit.* See also Matei Stircea-Craciun, *Paul Neagu: Nine Catalytic Stations, A Study in Hyletic Symbolism* (Bucharest: Anastasia, 2003), p. 184.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Demarco, "Such is the Dance," in *Paul Neagu, Nine Catalytic Stations, 1975-1987*, exhibition catalogue, (Edinburgh: Demarco Gallery, 1988), p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Clare Henry, review of *Nine Catalytic Stations* at Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, 1988, *Art Review*, April 22, 1988.