SUPERTHRIVE

20 JANUARY - 27 FEBRUARY 2000

RICE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

STEPHEN HENDEE

SUPERTHRIVE

SuperThrive, 2000
Site-specific installation within 40' x 44' space with 16' ceilings
Courtesy Stephen Hendee and Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, California

Rice Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the Rice University campus, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the Web at www.rice.edu/ruag

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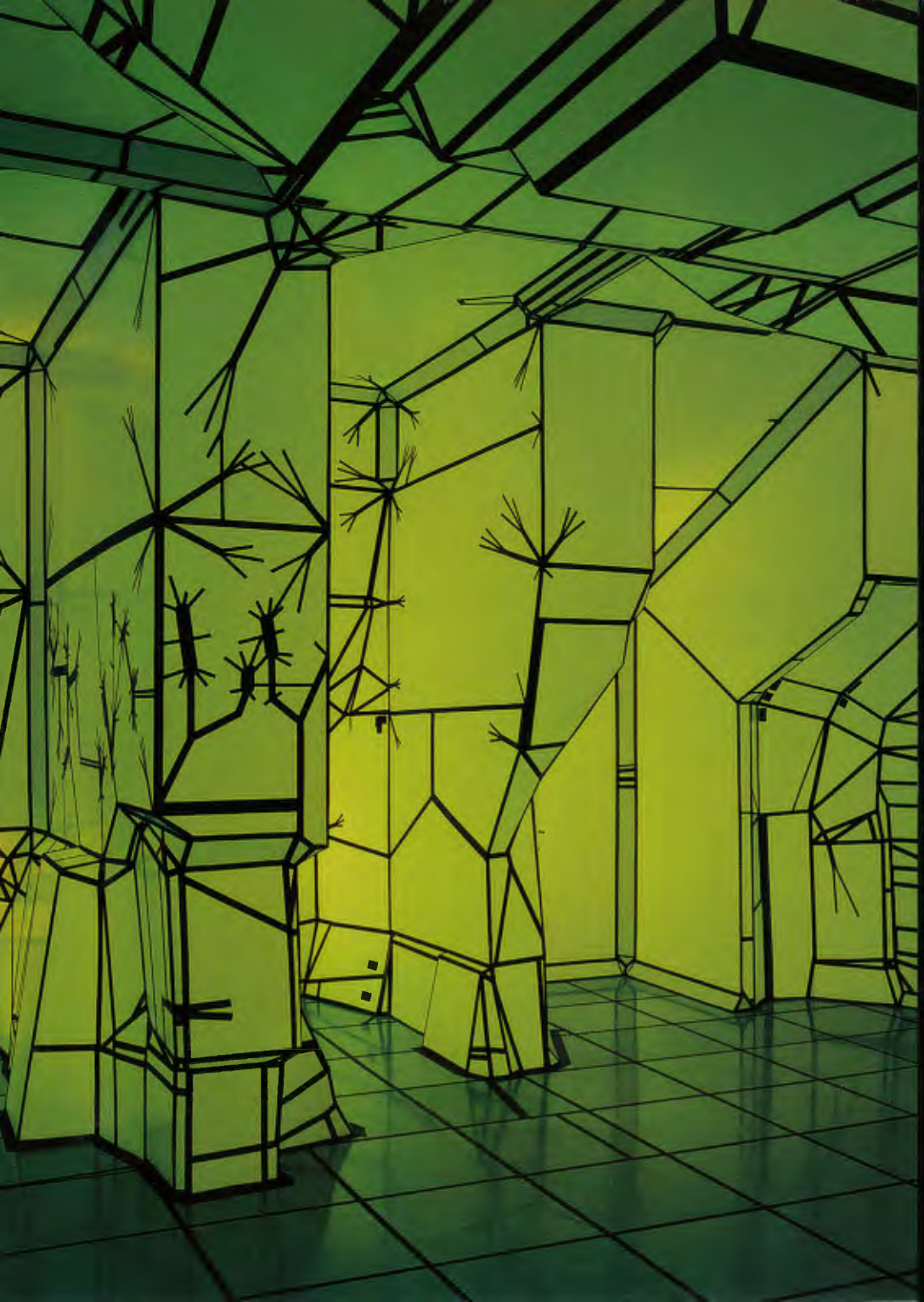
INTRODUCTION

Stephen Hendee's work reflects his thoughts about the dissolving boundary between nature and technology. The faceted architecture of *SuperThrive* alludes to both realms, recalling the frozen walls of Arctic ice caves, the softly illuminated interiors of medieval cathedrals, and the futuristic settings of some video games and science fiction films.

SuperThrive, a consummate "techno-phrase," indicates a powerful, unbounded momentum, recalling the exponential advances in computer technology and the soaring growth in the stock market at the close of the 20th century. In contrast with this fast-paced world, Hendee employs a decidedly low-tech and laborious process to construct his glowing, room-sized sculptures. Unassisted by a computer's three-dimensional design capabilities, he decides on a general layout, then begins an arduous process of hand-cutting and assembling foam board components. Rather than follow a fully preconceived plan, he allows the structure to unfold, to grow, and to change. "These spaces become an impression of dealing with them on a real-time basis, of filling geometry in a way that is not necessarily expeditious, but is certainly organic and spontaneous," he observes. The real-time labor involved in making *SuperThrive* was considerable; Stephen worked in the gallery, largely unassisted, for four weeks of fourteen-hour days.

Like technology, Stephen Hendee's environments are both seductive and ominous. Despite their radiance, they are sterile; they can be disconcerting at the same time that they are alluring. Stephen sees the works as evoking "a feeling of suspended time and isolation," not unlike the experience of being on the Internet, where, "You can be in there with a bunch of people and feel like you are alone." Anticipating a world increasingly difficult to label as "natural," Stephen Hendee's work questions the consequences, both positive and negative, of our ever more intimate relationship with technology.

Kimberly Davenport
Director



EXCERPTS FROM AN EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN STEPHEN HENDEE AND KIMBERLY DAVENPORT

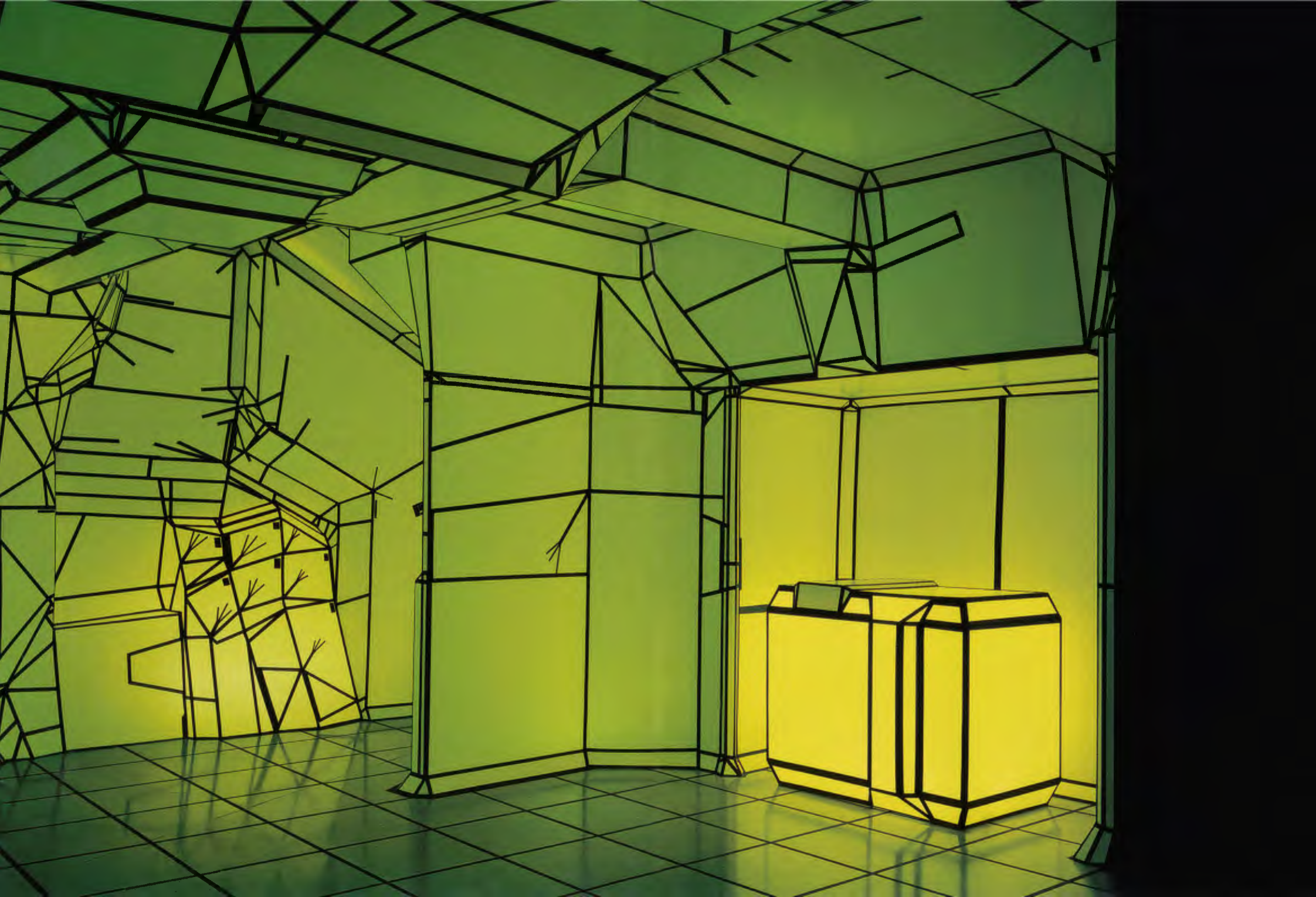
JANUARY 2000

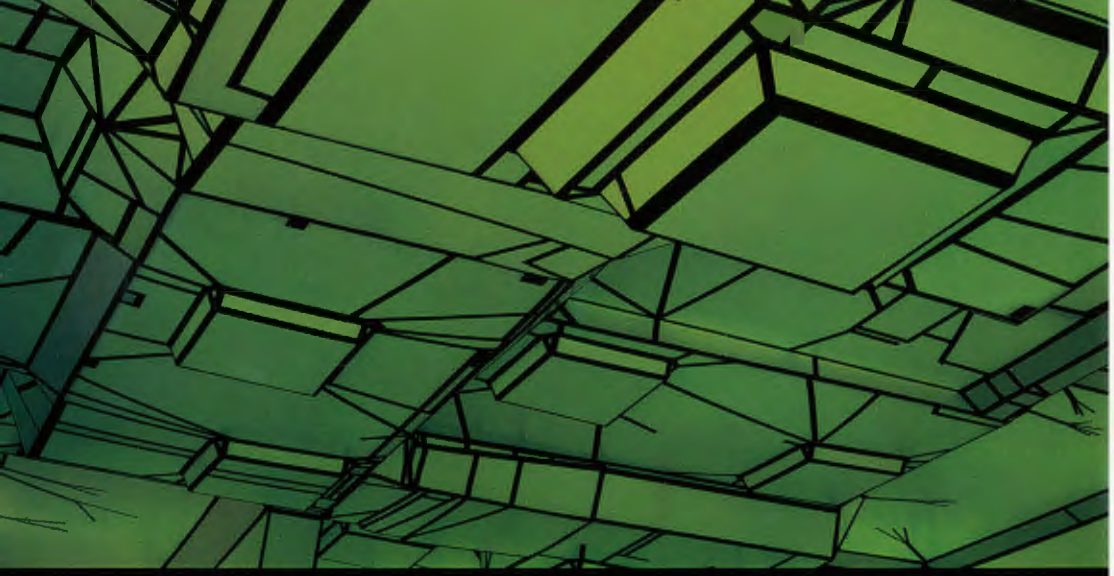
Kimberly Davenport: What was your initial impression of the gallery? What challenges did it present?

Stephen Hendee: Rice University Art Gallery is a massive space in which to build a single structure. Since I had never worked on this scale, I gambled that I had enough time to make such a complex structure. The fact that I had a month on site made all the difference; most venues only allow about two weeks. I now realize that to do projects of this scale in the future, I will have to modularize and prefabricate the spaces in order to get the same amount of detail in less time.

You have mentioned that your work is strongly affected by the specifics of the space. In this case, how did the space shape your thinking about the piece?

More often than not when I am building, a single interaction or realization can completely change the course that the piece will take. The first day that I was in the space, the previous exhibition was being deinstalled, and I noticed that there were cables going into the ceiling which had been supports for a center wall. Realizing that I could use the ceiling for support, I threw out my idea of a tunnel structure and decided to build a multi-level ceiling hung by cables, something that I'd never done before. To make it easier on myself, I decided to make the ceiling panels horizontal to the floor, and to fit the panels at right angles to one another. This way the panels would correspond with the grid of the tiles on the floor. When the piece was almost finished, I taped the grid of the floor tiles to pull it further together with the formal elements from the structure.



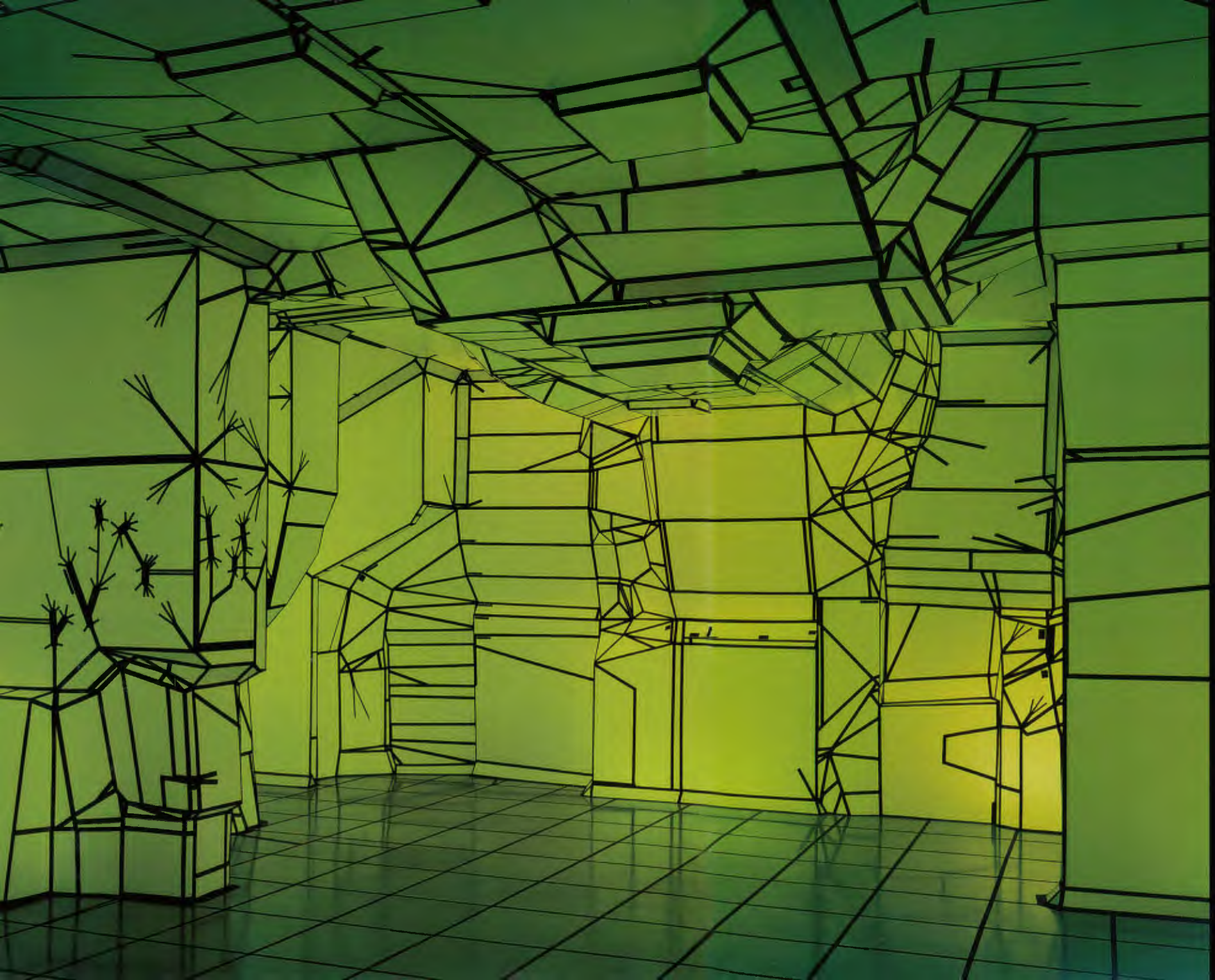


You describe your work as being more referential than abstract. Can you comment on that?

In many ways I resist the assertion that the work is abstract; isn't all representation an abstraction? DNA is a design code for most life on earth, and in that sense, we are all walking abstractions. What comprises the seeming abstraction of my work is partially inspired by the XYZ wireframe coordinates of computer space. The digital space that makes up a three-dimensional object is actually a pragmatic design code to present that information on a computer screen, paper, or 3-D printer. Who is to say that is any more abstract than a photograph of a street scene?

What is the significance of the title, *SuperThrive*? Since you decided on the title before beginning the work, did it influence or help define how the work would develop?

SuperThrive represents the boundless industrialized growth and economic globalization that currently has its moment. It also refers to a force which can have positive, life-affirming manifestations such as prosperity, productivity and cultural evolution. Conversely, it can also represent more sinister aspects of technology: once we finally train ourselves to perceive one another as machines, what is to keep us from simply eliminating our humanity?



Each of your works is defined by a particular color. What is the significance of the green of *SuperThrive*?

Green is a color associated with natural growth. I'm fascinated that, increasingly, a lot of the environments we consider to be "natural" are, in fact, corporate spaces. For example, Iowa is the most agriculturally developed state in the nation, and it's a huge factory floor. It's not a natural space anymore. One of the last times I was in the Sierras I found myself in a corporate forest. It was a place where all the trees were tagged, and parts of the forest were constantly being knocked down. When you see the trees in these kinds of clusters, you realize you're not in a "real" organic space. In *SuperThrive* I wanted there to be this sense of blurring between two worlds, between organic and inorganic, between nature and machine.

Did you have a narrative in mind as you constructed *SuperThrive*? You have referred to the glowing box near the entrance as a "Power Source" and the dark area opposite it as a "Negation" – can you expand on that?

It's the narrative of life cycles. There is no difference between technology and biology, in the sense that we are evolving technological tools for our larger purposes. As tools are an extension of ourselves, we are evolving into a post-human form, where our relationship to mechanized sustenance is the primary source for our survival.

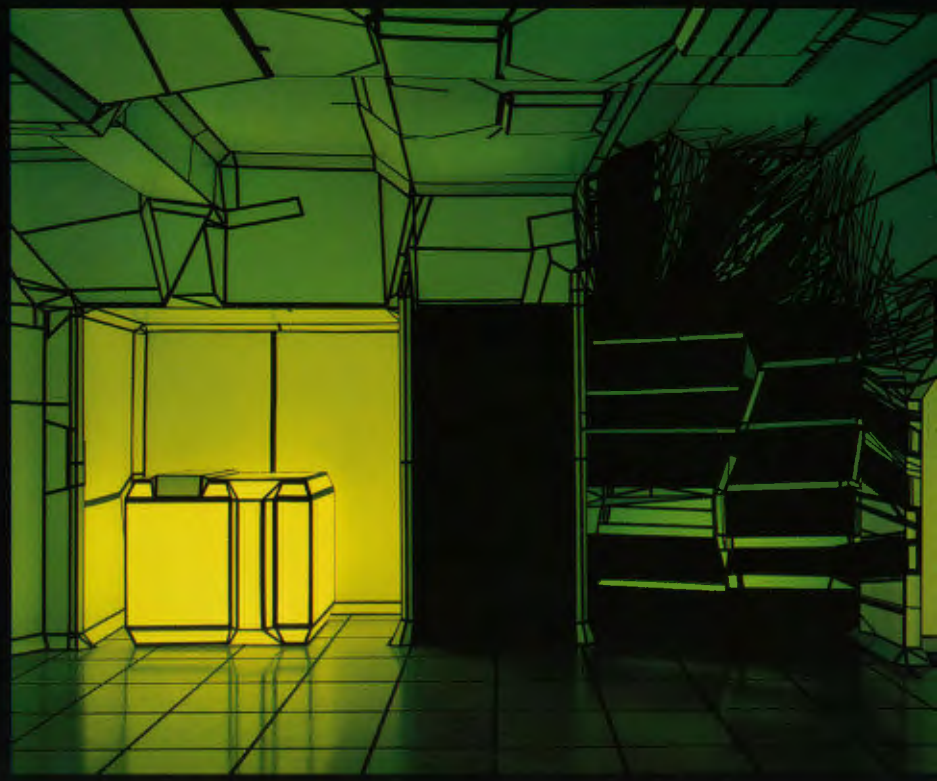
Even the simple "Power Source" grows or supports an increasingly complex structure that ends in either its death, or its transformation to something on the next level of emergence. In the United States we practically bathe in electricity everyday. The "Power Source," a simple yet primary structure, is something that changes everything about us.

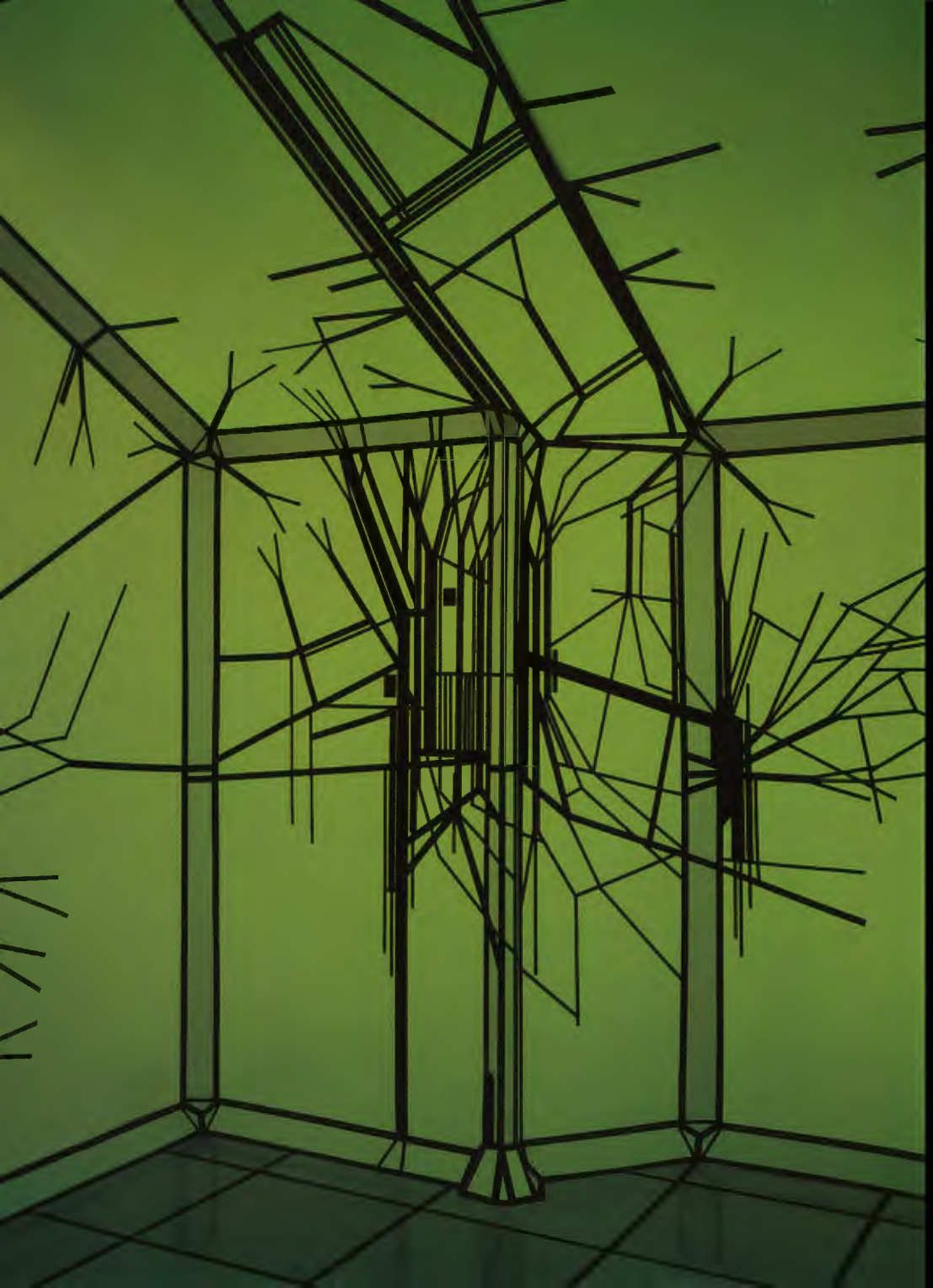
Despite the high-tech inspiration for your work, the actual process is very low-tech and physically arduous. In the future, do you hope to incorporate computers or other devices into your work?

I hope to find venues that are willing to support the exploration of my work by allowing me to alter floor elevations, and work with three-dimensional sound, and animated lighting systems. Every time I work in a space I try to challenge my assumptions, to go as far as possible with the support and time frame provided.

The temporary spaces have evolved to the point where I would like to make them more permanent, though to do this will be as expensive as architecture. My environments are so complex and so highly site-specific, that once these massive structures are to be made out of permanent materials, I will have to use a computer design system to prefabricate parts.

I'd love to turn one of these spaces into a complete liquid screen environment where all the information could be displayed on the surfaces and moved around. It would all be touch screen, a completely animated environment where the entire surface becomes an interface. There could, for example, be places that when you walk down the hall, the computer senses where you are, and it sends information to wherever you are walking. It would be a fluid environment that would somehow simulate a natural – whatever we understand as natural – environment, a bucolic space.





ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in 1968 in Santa Monica, California, Stephen Hendee has known since the age of fifteen that he would be an artist. Determined to pursue his dream, he rented an art studio while still in high school. He received a BFA from San Francisco Art Institute in 1990, and an MFA from Stanford University in 1993. At Stanford, lacking the funds for more expensive materials, he used cardboard to fabricate small sculptures. These continued to grow in size until "the model expanded beyond the walls and people could walk inside the work." Hendee thinks of his work as large-scale sculpture, resisting characterizing it as installation, a category he finds to be lacking in specificity. He is influenced by diverse sources: nanotechnology, computer design, early Modernism, science fiction, and his personal experience spelunking. Hendee currently lives and works in Newark, New Jersey. *SuperThrive* is his largest sculpture to date.

Hendee has exhibited in numerous group exhibitions including *Restructure*, 1999, Grinnell College, Grinnell, IA; *Somewhen*, 1999, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, MA; *Generation Z*, 1999, P.S.1, Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY; *Seeing & Believing*, 1998, Sculpture Center, New York, NY; and *Bay Area Now*, 1997, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA.

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