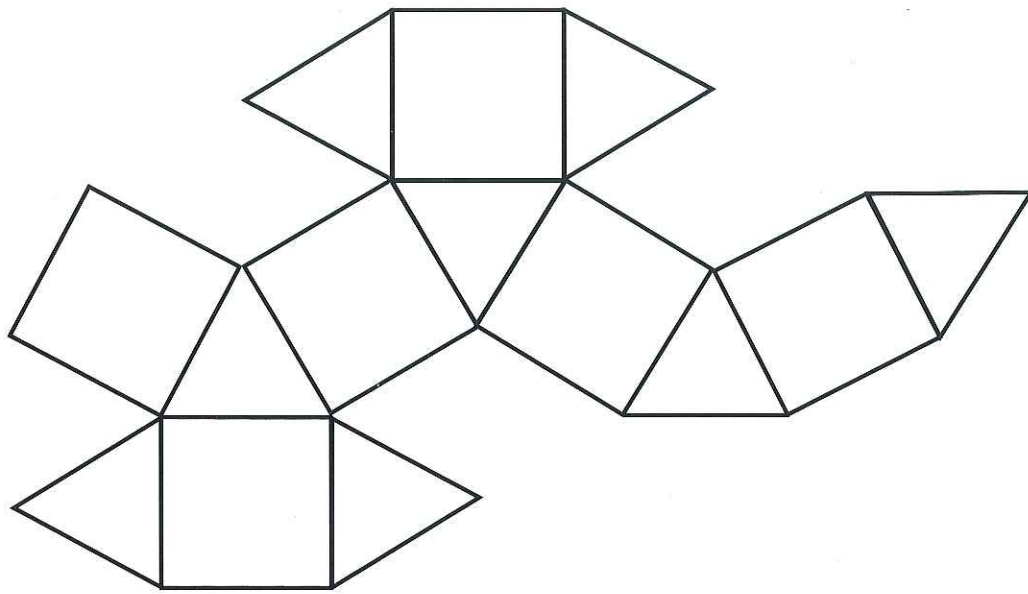


PATRICK MCGEE *U₇*

JANUARY 12 - FEBRUARY 28, 2003



The Hyde Park Art Center is a gallery space, a school for the visual arts, and home to a 60-year tradition of contemporary art practice and promotion. In exhibiting the work of Patrick McGee, the Art Center continues a newer tradition of support for work that responds directly to the Center's Ruth Horwich Gallery, a former ballroom of the Del Prado Hotel. In 2000, the artists' collective Simparch installed *FREE BASIN*, a functioning skate bowl beneath which students walked to painting, drawing, and ceramics classes. In 2001, Karen Reimer and Constance Bacon transformed the gallery with a pieced fabric "garment" called *COLD COMFORT*. This installation allowed visitors to move around and behind the fabric in a space between the walls and the softly-lit, monochromatic piecework that covered every surface except the floor. Ingeniously conceived and painstakingly installed, these works of art transformed

the idea of a "white cube" gallery space and broadened expectations of what an art exhibit might be.

In *U₇*, Patrick McGee continues his own interest in regular polyhedrons with an unfolded cuboctahedron. While the overarching net of strings may seem, at first glance, a random arrangement, closer examination reveals rigorous attention to the points of intersection. A geometric figure stands out, illuminated by fluorescent paint. The form has been adjusted carefully to respond to the stairway and existing gallery walls, allowing visitors to interact with the work from a variety of perspectives. McGee activates what might be seen as the negative space of the gallery, using its full breadth and depth to anchor the central form. His structure embraces the gallery's whimsical aspects, making those eccentricities meaningful.

The Art Center is proud to present this catalogue,

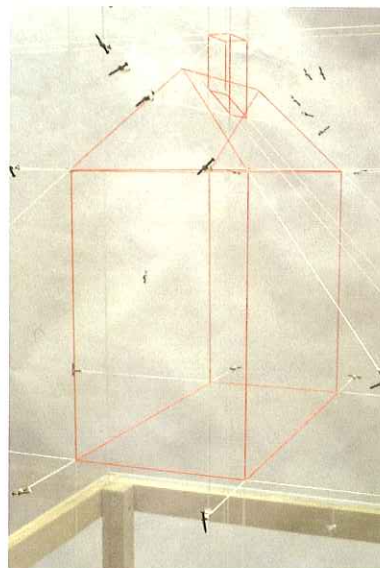
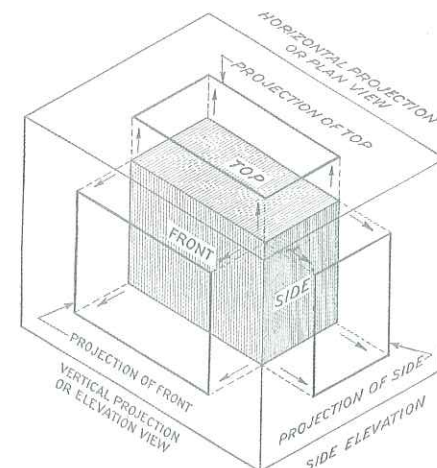
with many previously-unpublished views of McGee's work in both the United States and Germany. The catalogue essay by Roberta Lord is informed by her long friendship with McGee. The two met when McGee was a student at the Kansas City Art Institute working with celebrated sculptor Dale Eldred, to whom Lord was married. An art critic once trained as an engineer, Lord brings to her essay not only an aesthetic understanding of McGee's intention, but a scientist's acumen.

The Hyde Park Art Center thanks the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, Joe Bristol, and Kevin Pierce of Farr Associates for contributions to the installation of *U₇*.

Annie Morse, Exhibitions Coordinator
January, 2003

U7

PATRICK MCGEE



LEFT TO RIGHT

Orange House, 1990, Plexiglas, string, dye, 21" x 17" x 17"

"Projectograph," from *Mechanical Drawing* Kenison, McKinney, Plumridge, Chicago, 1947

In the early 1990s, Patrick McGee decided to teach himself mechanical drawing, and he gathered a number of books on the subject. He had several large sculptures in mind but he couldn't picture all their details. He thought formal renderings would help. Barely into the books' first lessons, his journey changed course. He had been seduced by the elementary triad of three-dimensional imaging: the top view, the front view, and the side view.

A drawing hovered above the top of the object and a drawing pushed out from the front and a drawing pushed out from the side. All the lines of the drawings connected.

Every point of each drawing extended back to the points of the three-dimensional object. And I thought: 'You could extend those lines out and make this whole thing as a three-dimensional object. Basically, if you took a Plexiglas box and you put the three mechanical drawings

on the box and drilled the holes in the Plexiglas and pulled the strings through, you would end up with that object and those referencing lines, just like in the mechanical-drawing book.' And so I made a house.

—PATRICK MCGEE

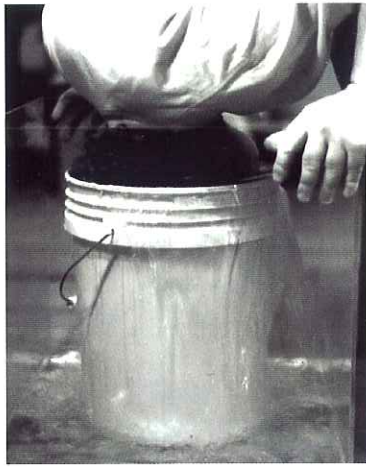
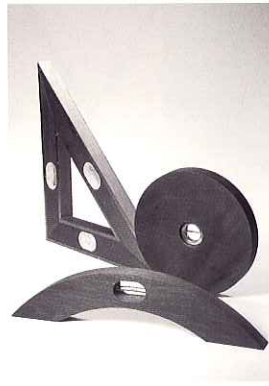
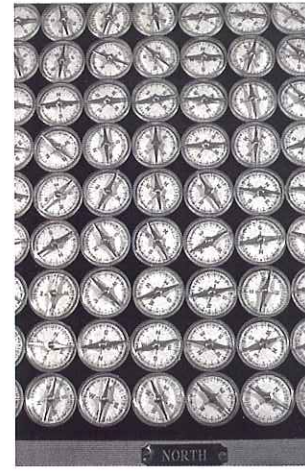
The airy orange house in the Plexiglas vitrine led to a room-size installation of the same form, which in turn led to a series of gallery-scaled string constructions. In each case, the strings draw the outlines of a primary form—initially architectural, more recently geometrical—that is then highlighted in fluorescent paint.

Looking back, the string constructions are a logical, even inevitable, progression of the work McGee had begun with a series of model-scale works at the De Graaf Fine Art Gallery in Chicago in 1990.

The first orange-house model appeared in this exhibition, along with "Level," "Plumb," "Elapsed Time," "True North," and "K." These early works featured level vials, plumb bobs, directional compasses, digital clocks, and stretched rubber straps. They were beautifully crafted and exceedingly spare, with all attention focused on the devices themselves and the phenomena they measured or manifested. Only "True North," a square array of 100 inexpensive compasses, included a humorous sidebar too familiar to anyone who has ever relied on a cheap compass: the arrows pointed every which way. McGee solemnly heeded the unreliable guidance and placed a plate inscribed with the word "North" on each of the display case's four sides.

These early works emanated wit, wonder, and the

BY ROBERTA LORD



LEFT TO RIGHT

McGee dunking his head in a bucket of water to measure the volume of *1 Immersion*, 1996

Triangle, 1993, 15" x 15" x 2", *Round*, 1993, 9" dia. x 1 1/2", *Segment*, 1993, 4" x 12" x 1 1/2", mahogany, brass, level vials.

Photo: Tom Fennessey

1 Burden, 1996, engraved stainless steel, 9" x 3"

True North (detail), 1990, compasses, brass, wood and glass, 34" x 17" x 17"

trickiness of a magic trick, yet, with the exception of "True North," none of these qualities was actually *in* the works themselves. The jolt of discovery, often humor-tinged, was the viewer's own, as s/he suddenly realized that though the tools McGee featured are so commonplace they're displayed in plastic buckets next to hardware store cash registers, they still measure with precision what we—*Homo sapiens sapiens*—can barely perceive. Our brains fire electrical pulses 40 times a second and our hearts beat like metronomes, yet we have to wear watches to get anywhere on time. Within the first few years of our lives we learn to stand upright, yet only the most graceful and highly trained achieve anything near perfect vertical balance. Our bodies contain iron, yet few of us can tell which way is north.

However confounding, this is who and what we are. In order to build, explore, and engage in

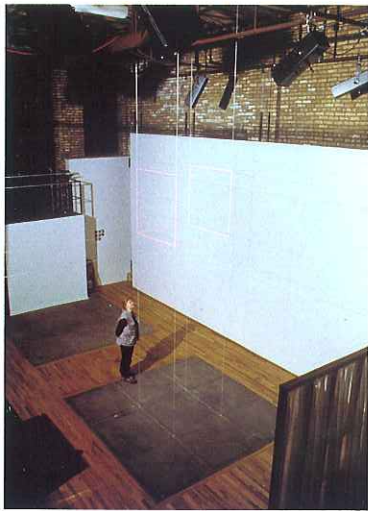
commerce—not to mention find our way home before dark—and with only our bodies and fallible awareness to serve as reference, we devised instruments with the sophistication that we lack. In the design of these instruments, and in our larger ongoing efforts to *perceive*, *name*, and *measure*, a poetry both goofy and enchanting comes regularly into play. It's the presence of this poetry that McGee works to reveal.

Truth and Beauty are the names given to two of six subatomic particles (the others are Up, Down, Charm, and Strange), which together under the name of "Quarks" (gleaned from Joyce's Finnegans Wake by the physicist Gell-Mann in 1978) are assumed to be the fundamental building blocks of matter. The choice of those names indicates a growing need of scientists to address questions of aesthetics and motivation in their field. —PATRICK MCGEE

Early forms of measurement were variable and perishable: an inch was linked to the size of a barley grain, a foot was the length of King Charlemagne's foot, and a cubit was the distance from someone's elbow to the tip of that same someone's middle finger. For "Bureau of Standards," a one-man exhibition at Chicago's Ten in One Gallery in 1996, McGee paid homage to his forebears' use of body parts as reference criteria by developing a measurement system based on the dimensions of his head. The basic increment of length (one Fit) is his head's circumference; the basic increment of volume (one Immersion) is his head's volume, and the basic increment of weight (one Burden) is the weight of one Immersion of water.

Standards vary through the world, are constantly redetermined, and have an extremely whimsical history.

—PATRICK MCGEE



LEFT TO RIGHT

Orange Cube, 2000, 3' cube, string, dye,
Gallery 312, Chicago

Linear Exchange, 1998
project for "Not In My Lobby You Don't,"
string, dye, 14' x 35' x 150', Chicago

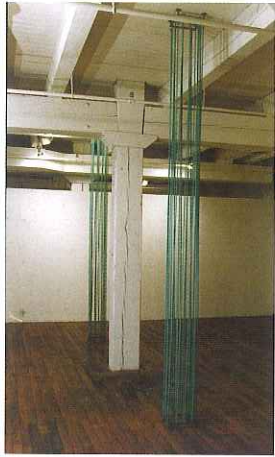
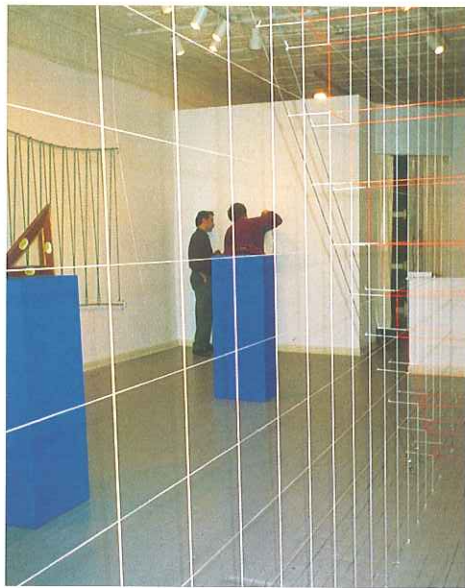
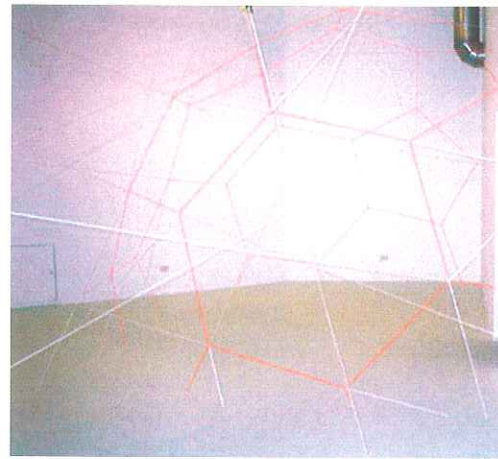
As McGee's interest in site-specificity has grown—that is, his interest in creating artworks that respond to the particular attributes of an exhibition space—he has moved away from works that address measurement issues, and toward three-dimensional string constructions. These include a large-scale version of his original orange house for A.R.C. Gallery (Chicago, 1996), a full-scale replication of a staircase and later of an El track truss-and-girder section for Ten In One Gallery (Chicago, 1995 and 1998), and a full-scale reversed replication of the front entrance at Gallery Johannes Zielke (Berlin, 1996). He also created architecturally scaled, overhead string drawings at St. James Cathedral (1997) and the Chicago Stock Exchange (1998). These latter two drawings, he says, were the only ones possible once he connected the interiors' obvious "dots": truss finials and column tops, respectively.

As these works progressed, he became more and more interested in the perceptual experience generated by the string-drawn volumes. At Gallery 312 (Chicago, 2000), he installed vertical strings that echoed the floor's gridlines and horizontal strings with similar spacing. Their intersection formed a cube suspended ten feet in the air. He capitalized on Arena Gallery's (Chicago, 2000) two entrances by creating a polyhedral volume that could be approached from within (via one entrance) or from without (via the other entrance). Aware that the building had originally housed the smokehouse for a sausage factory, McGee decided to make a truncated icosahedron—a 32-sided polyhedron consisting of twelve pentagons and twenty hexagons—which is, among other things, the form of a C_{60} carbon molecule. The discoverers of this molecule named it a Buckminsterfullerene (instantly nicknamed the

"buckyball") after Buckminster Fuller, a cosmological thinker much admired by McGee. Inventor, mathematician, architect, designer, and poet, Fuller was renowned for both his humanism and his achievement of super-minimalist engineering solutions, including the geodesic dome.

McGee's current string construction for the Hyde Park Art Center delineates the facets of another of Fuller's favorite shapes: a cuboctahedron. The 14-faced Archimedean solid—also called the heptaparallelohedron and, as tribute to Fuller, the *dymaxion*—has eight triangular faces and six square faces. Because each cuboctahedron can fit flush against twelve other cuboctahedra, the form lends itself particularly well to spherical close-packing, and to use in structural support systems. It is, from the human-emotion point of view, an extremely *secure* geometric form. Among a total of 75 uniform





LEFT TO RIGHT

Tension Columns, 1995, 156" x 11" x 11", rubber, steel, TBA Exhibition Space, Chicago,

Orange Staircase (foreground), gallery view, 1994, Ten in One Gallery, Chicago

Orange Buckyball, 2000, 9' truncated icosohedron, string, dye, Arena Gallery, Chicago

polyhedra, the cuboctahedron's specific designation is *U₇*.

Inspired by the Art Center's spacious interior, McGee presents *U₇*'s pattern as though he had split as many seams as necessary to open it all the way up and lay its pattern out flat . . . but that the form had then, on its own, perhaps reflexively, begun to close back up, folding inward to re-enclose a cuboctahedral volume. The alternation of triangles and squares establishes a reassuring rhythm, suggestive of reliable architecture at the micro and macro scale, from DNA's truss-like double helix to space-station outriggers. To achieve the necessary metaphoric transparency—that is, for the viewer's eye and imagination to read the sculpture as imaging something genuine and significant—only the necessary lines are drawn and every vector is absolutely accurate.

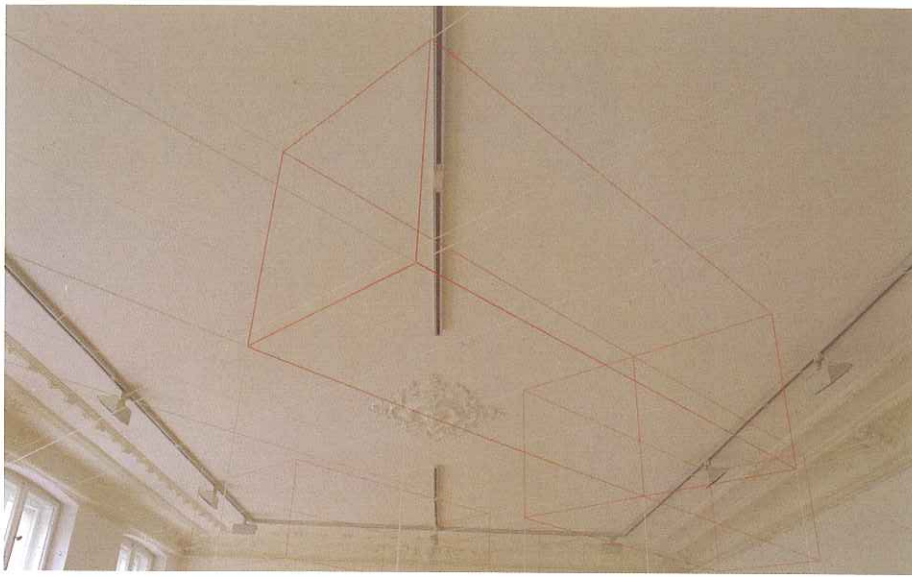
Initially, *U₇* presents the viewer with a perceptual challenge: What is it? And where does it begin and end? Like the familiar optical illusion known as the Necker Cube (the wire-frame isometric drawing that seems at one moment to be angled to the right and the next moment to be angled to the left) grasping the extent of *U₇*—that is, seeing it as whole rather than as an array of parts—requires the viewer to move around in the space, experimenting with different angles and focal lengths, until the image outlined in orange crystallizes. (The gallery's balcony is the spot from which the form appears most clearly whole.) McGee goes through the same process when he's building the works, he says, and calls it the "comprehension shuffle." Despite his intimate acquaintance with his constructions, he continues to be awed by the phenomenological experience of recognition: the "aha" moment when the form

emerges, the mind creates the planar surfaces, and the psyche positions itself relative to the overall structure as though it is both web and shelter.

My work borrows from scientific concepts to inform a visual poetry. —PATRICK MCGEE

Each string-work's apparent simplicity is wholly deceptive. Along with all evidence of countless mathematical calculations, the large jig elements McGee builds and assembles in the space to accurately position the strings are gone, and no signs remain of his struggle to anchor strings in unanticipated places dictated by the form's vectors—electrical outlet boxes, air conditioning vents, the juncture of the wall and the floor. He deliberately erases all evidence of his technical virtuosity.

Though all of McGee's works are grounded in scientific form or principle, they distinguish



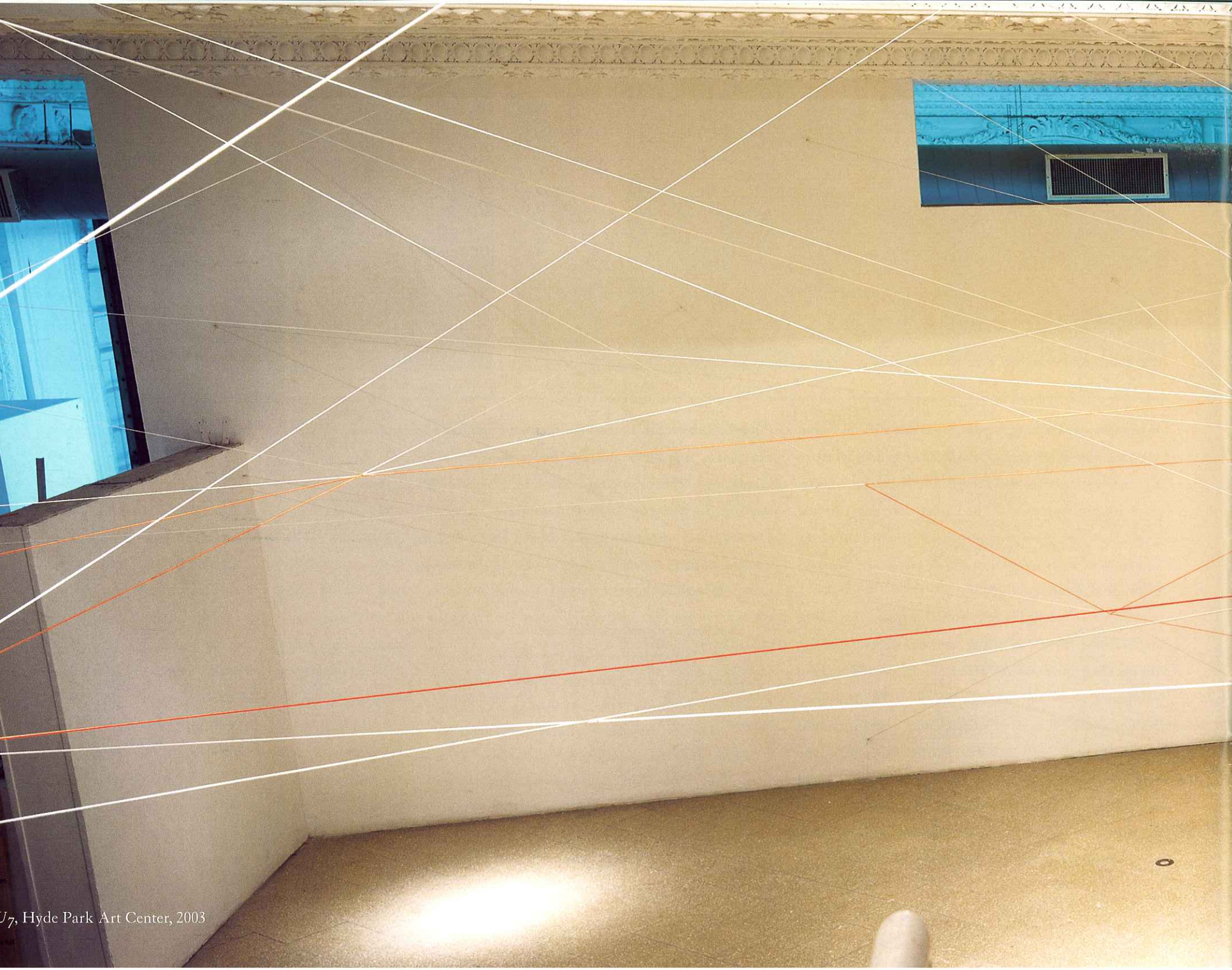
Logical Depth, 2002, 12' x 18' x 36', string, dye, urethane, Refugium Galerie, Berlin.
Photo courtesy of Refugium Galerie.

themselves from much tech-related work by what they are *not*: They are not the Pythagorean argument for mathematics as the model for universal reason; they are not segments of the Constructivists' rational grid; they are not promotions of the Minimalists' assertion of logic over emotion, of physical principles over spontaneous gesture.

McGee's works don't presume to introduce materialism to an aesthetic consciousness. Instead, they display the material world's vitality, mystery, and resonance with the human imagination. In short, McGee's work is neither didactic nor dogmatic; he is showing here, not telling. As he did with the mechanical-drawing books, he mines the world of science for fanciful and enlightening truths. He is artist-as-philosopher/explorer. He seeks knowledge about knowledge and then shares his discoveries.

Karl Marx found Western culture guilty of turning ideas into objects, a process he termed *Verdinglichung*, or "thingification." McGee reverses this practice by creating provocative objects that, in viewing, we metamorphose back into mental constructs. In this process he reminds us that art is, and has always been, primarily ideological.

As scientific proposition and theories eventually become part of the general community, their application and imagery become part of daily life. Gravity, the passage of time, the rotation of the earth, magnetism, electricity, energy, force, are not only everyday experiences, but experiences we can name and so feel to some extent safe to deal with. —PATRICK MCGEE



LARGE SCALE SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATIONS

- 2003 U7, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago
2002 "Rectangle into Square," Lake Forest College Sonnenschein Gallery, Lake Forest, IL
"Logical Depth," solo show, Refugium Galerie, Berlin, Germany
2000 "Orange Buckyball," solo show, Arena Gallery, Chicago
"Siteworks," Gallery 312, Chicago
"Blink: Interventions in the Salon," Northern Illinois University Gallery, Chicago
1999 "Otherville" University of Illinois Gallery, Normal, IL
"A Show," Ten in One Gallery, Chicago
1998 "Not in my lobby, you don't," Hyde Park Art Center and One Financial Place, Chicago
"Sculpture in Chicago: The Next Generation," UIC Gallery 400, Chicago
1997 "Site Specific Installations," St. James Episcopal Cathedral, Chicago

ONE AND TWO -PERSON SHOWS

- 1996 "Bureau of Standards," Ten in One Gallery, Chicago
1996 "Installationen," with Adelheid Mers, Galerie Johannes Zielke, Berlin, Germany
1995 "Fulcrum," with Jennifer Krauss, Tom Blackman Associates, Chicago
1994 "Truth and Beauty," Ten in One Gallery, Chicago

SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

- 2002 "Just Good Art," Invitational Auction/Exhibition, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago
2001 "Collaborative Fusion," 450 Broadway Gallery, New York, NY
"Just Good Art," Invitational Auction/Exhibition, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago
1999 "Millenium Fusion Project," A.R.C. Gallery, Chicago
1997 "From a Whisper to a Scream," Ten in One Gallery, Chicago
"Navigating Spaces," Northwestern University/ Noyes Cultural Center, Evanston, IL
"Vorfrühling," cb gallery, Vienna, Austria
1995 "The Grid Show," UIC Gallery 400, Chicago
"12th Benefit Art Auction," Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
1993 "Categories of Robert Smithson," N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago
1992 "Metaphysical and Metaphorical Tools by Artists," Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Art, Racine, WI
"Grit and Polish - Art and Space," State of Illinois Art Gallery, Chicago
"Earth Statements," A.R.C. Gallery, Chicago
1991 "Guess Game," Ten in One Gallery, Chicago
"Mind/ Matter=Sculpture," Fermi Lab, Batavia, IL
"Inaugural Exhibition," Tough Gallery, Chicago
"Jacobi, McGee, Mers," Ten in One Gallery, Chicago
1990 "Director's Choice," DeGraaf Fine Art, Chicago

EDUCATION

- 1985 BFA, Sculpture, Kansas City Art Institute, with Dale Eldred and Jim Leedy
1982-3 The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Sculpture

AWARDS

- 2002 Illinois Arts Council Special Assistance Grant
1995 Chicago Artists International Program Grant, (CAIP)
1994 Community Arts Assistance Program Grant, (CAAP)
1980 Nancy Joyce Murray Memorial Scholarship

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- "Fab Five," *Chicago Social Magazine*, by Kim Bastyr, Sept. 1999
"On Exhibit: modern art on holy ground," *The Reader*, by Jeff Huebner, May 22, 1997
"Statistical Research," *Whitewalls*, by the artist, Spring 1997
"In With the Out Crowd," *Dialogue*, by Timothy Porges, May/June 1996
"Bureau of Standards," booklet, by the artist, May 1996
"McGee...", *Chicago Tribune*, David McCracken, April 1994
"Earth Statements," *The Reader*, Mandy Morrison, Sept. 1992
"Just Plane Screwy," exhibition catalog, Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Art, Racine, WI July 1992
"Guess Game," *Flash Art*, by Kathryn Hixson, March 1992



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Artist's Talk February 1, 2003 at 3:30 pm at HPAC

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