

***Roots Disturb Concrete***

*by*

*Caroline Shank*

Abstract

Roots Disturb Concrete is an interactive installation in which I explore the mind's ability to romanticize as a means of survival. I identify each role played by the mind, body and soul through allegorical story telling techniques and interaction.



Roots Disturb Concrete

by

Caroline Shank

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Caroline Shank

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Thesis Advisor – Andrea Defelice

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Chair – Douglas Easterly

## Acknowledgments

*Thank you Mom and Dad for your undying love and support.*

*I love you with all my heart.*

*-Ca*

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## INTRODUCTION 1

There is an instinctual human need to romanticize, almost as a means of survival. We curate our memories to follow a linear narrative by embellishing them with things such as fate, lessons and hope. The mind can alter a memory (consciously or subconsciously) the same way time can alter an image, through new experiences and information. Within this process, information can feel lost to the sands of time, like details of a memory or the context of a photograph. This information doesn't actually disappear at all but instead takes on an unrecognizable form, like looking at an old picture of a friend that went on to become a lover or remembering a conversation that you later discovered to be filled with lies. It's hard for the brain to digest negative experiences, sometimes we'll unknowingly discard a memory all together because it's simply too much for the soul to bear. This process speaks to the saying that "ignorance is bliss" because living a life of not knowing is more freeing than the weight of the true lived experience. This is where the ability to romanticize becomes a life or death instinct, can you create room for purpose within a traumatic experience?

In December of 2022 I made my annual visit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in my home city. Although having experienced the permanent installations countless times I still enjoy a stroll through gallery 283 of the Modern and Contemporary Art floor. It was on this particular visit that I had noticed a large, rustic, wooden door tucked around a corner of the gallery. Unsure if it was a piece or just apart of the natural architecture of the building I studied it for a long time. My eyes traced the weathered planks of wood and the impressive black bolts that held them together. It was only after a few minutes



that I had noticed a disturbance in the pattern of the bolts, instead where two should sit there were two holes at eye level. Understanding then that I was suppose to look through them, I approached the door and peered in, what I discovered was a scene of a nude woman, legs sprawled open, on a bundle of twigs with her head out of frame, and in her hand was a lit gas lantern. The view was cinematic and the reveal theatrical, I walked away from the piece bemused by the experience. I also made sure to watch as a young father lifted his son to the peep holes having not looked through them himself before hand. Their confused and then disapproving reactions were just as satisfying as my initial discovery. The piece in question is called *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas)<sup>1</sup> by Marcel Duchamp and it has immensely inspired the experience I aim to cultivate in *Roots Disturb Concrete*.



01.



<sup>1</sup> Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas). 1946–1966, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

An old weathered shack sits dislocated in the gallery. Tattered by time and nature, the structure appears as if you had stumbled upon it in the woods. Inheriting the Duchampian application of peep holes, the structure invites viewers to peer inside. When doing so the individual is confronted with live footage of themselves approaching the piece, done so utilizing a 6 second lag in the feed. Through creeping vines framing the scene (see illustration 01 & 02) viewers are looking into the past. The longer they choose to observe the more distorted the visuals become. The distortions that take place reference graphic systems that operate with a data width of 8 bits, synonymous with early Super Mario Bros<sup>2</sup> and Legend of Zelda models.



02.

<sup>2</sup> SuperJustinBros, "NES - Super Mario Bros - Mario & Luigi," Sprite Sheet.

As viewers move through the environment, pixelated motion trails follow the forms. Utilizing color tracking in touchdesigner, a red vinyl decal of a star placed at the foot of the shack's door stands as the color trigger. Once a viewer approaches the door, the decal is covered—causing the bloom on the live feed to gradually ramp up. Once the color decal is detected again the effect resets.

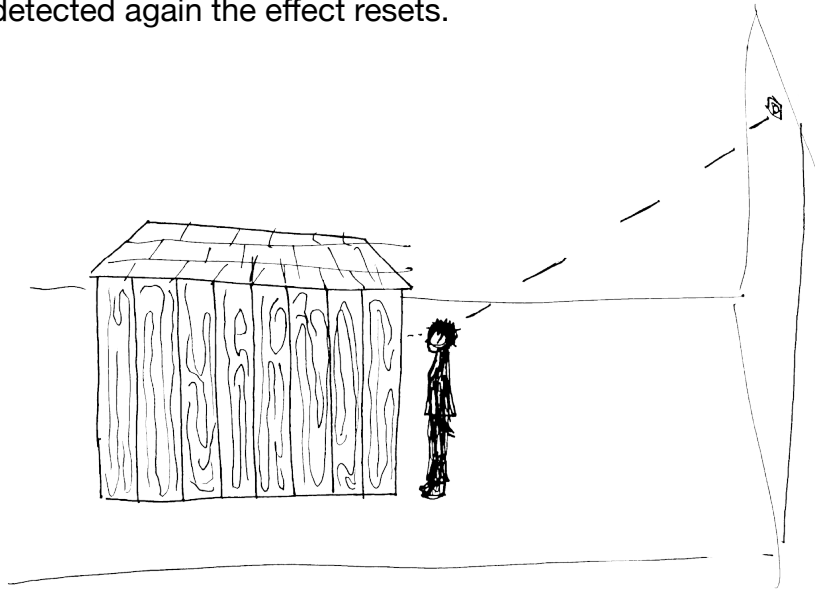


Illustration 01.

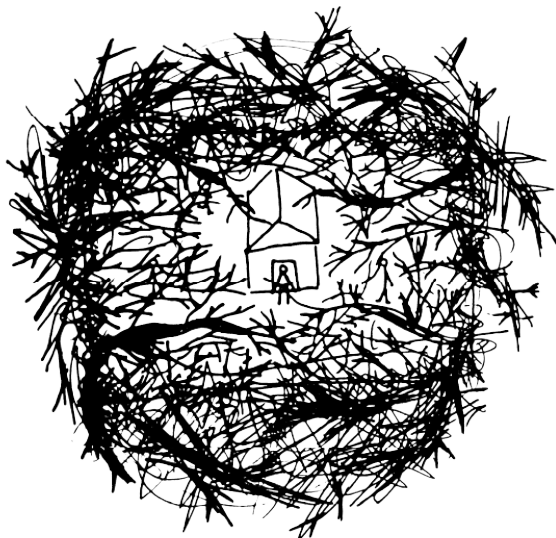


Illustration 02.

## INFLUENCES 5

In Hito Steyerl's *In Defense of the Poor Image* <sup>3</sup>, Steyerl addresses the transformation of an authentic image and how it evolves or devolves through time and in the process becomes something she coined as a "poor image." I was attracted to this piece in tandem with my readings of Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* <sup>4</sup> in which he explains the impact that emotional experiences and memories have on our bodies. The idea that the mind can alter a memory the same way time can altar an image was a captivating discovery for me, all of this which I attribute to the loss of information. Have it be through a low resolution image or a traumatic memory that the brain chops up and hides away in order to protect the soul, the loss of information has lead me to question, where did it go? Whats in the empty space where the information once was? Other readings that have inspired this piece and elaborate on similar subjects are Susan Stewart's *On longing* <sup>5</sup> and Mark Fisher's *The Weird and The Eerie*<sup>6</sup>. Stewart explores how souvenirs mediate memory through longing, distance, and personal desire. She argues that these objects often simplify or romanticize the past, distorting complex narratives into emotionally resonant, but ideologically selective symbols. I believe this phenomenon is extremely applicable to imagery, specifically due to the commodification

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<sup>3</sup> Hito Steyerl,. "In Defense of the Poor Image." *e-flux Journal*, no. 10, November 2009. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>

<sup>4</sup> Bessel van der Kolk,. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Viking, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Stewart,. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Duke University Press, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*. Repeater Books, 2016.

of photography through the invention of the iPhone and what has led to the mass distribution of digital images. Social media platforms like Instagram feed off the desires Stewart address's in her writings. People tend to only share the idealized aspects of their lives on social media, ideas that lack nuance and enforce selective narratives. Applying this ideology to Hito Steyerl's concept of the erosion of the authentic image through time, we find that perhaps we are unreliable narrators that distort not only our own perception of ourselves but others too.

Eva Hesse is an German-born American sculptor who pioneered the use of latex, fiberglass and plastics in sculpture. This piece *Handle with Gloves: Twelve Readings*<sup>7</sup> depicts a book that almost appears as a living organism or apart of the body with its flesh like pages and vein like tendrils. The pages are free of words but in their place sprawl flesh tone colors. I was drawn to Hesse's application of tendrils as a way to communicate life, a technique borrowed in *Roots Disturb Concrete*.



07.

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<sup>7</sup> Eva Hesse: Visual & Visceral." *Making Handmade Books*, April 6, 2011. <https://makinghandmadebooks.blogspot.com/2011/04/eva-hesse-visual-visceral.html>.

I tend to gravitate towards stories that explore familial dynamics and the complex interplay between nature and nurture, examining how inherited traits and learned behaviors shape individual identity and interpersonal relationships. Through allegorical storytelling and found-objects, I aim to provoke thought on the forces that influence who we are, how we connect with others and how we cope. In my piece *I Breathe in When You Breathe Out*<sup>8</sup> a dilapidated dollhouse rests atop a grass mound, its curtains billowing outward, propelled by a mysterious wind emanating from within. Beside it stands a second dollhouse—newer, cleaner, and untouched by time. The wind from the old house crashes against the side of the new one, causing its exterior to decay and its curtains to stir in response. This interaction demonstrates the dynamic of abuse that is passed down through generations within families. As viewers observe, they are drawn to place their hand between the two houses, feeling the wind firsthand. In doing so, they shield the new house, interrupting the destructive influence of the old and offering a moment of protection from inherited dysfunction.



08.

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<sup>8</sup> Caroline Shank, *I Breathe in When You Breathe Out*: Basel wood, earth, Arduino 2024



In the fall of 2023, I rekindled my passion for found objects and storytelling, leading to the creation of *Life Spout*<sup>9</sup>. This assemblage tells the story of a mother and child depicted on the front of the frame, with the narrative unfolding on the reverse side, which functions as a stage. Through an allegorical exploration of the mother-child dynamic before and after birth, the piece uses found objects to embody the characters and themes at play. This approach of extending a work's narrative through found materials is a technique at play within *Roots Disturb Concrete*



09.

The purpose of the house like structure is to communicate the idea that there is something living within it. The house in this context represents the skull or human head

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<sup>9</sup> Caroline Shank, *Life Spout*: found object, 2023

in which the mind exists. The eyes or the windows to the soul take the form of peep holes on the door<sup>10</sup>. In this case the shack is weathered and over grown implying that it has survived many seasons, to achieve this effect I toiled with the idea to utilize either barn wood or coffee stained white pine. The benefit of employing barn wood would realize the most ideal look, though the drawbacks on this material were its cost and weight— leading to complicated transportation. On the flip, white pine can achieve the desired effect though it required more time and energy in comparison to the barn wood. On the upside, the white pine is less expensive and can be easily transported. The obstacles at hand had led me to consider other materials for the exterior such as vinyl planks, foam or wheat pasted images. After careful consideration, I found that the structure's visual appeal and weight were the features most important to me, leading me to land on hand weathered white pine as the material for the exterior.



10.

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<sup>10</sup> Caroline Shank, *Roots Disturb Concrete*. 2024-2025, White Pine, TouchDesigner.



## AESTHETIC ISSUES 10

Over the course of four months I cathartically destroyed the white pine using a wired brush and an interchangeable line up of tools such as a hammer, a knife and a screw driver to achieve the weathered effect. I stained the structure's exterior using English Breakfast tea, which tallied up to nearly 600 bags to coat the entire structure by the end of March<sup>11</sup>. Due to my studios lack of ventilation there were restrictions at play concerning the types of toxins that could be exposed indoors, leaving typical wood stain out of the question. But before landing on English Breakfast I explored other types of natural staining such as coffee, black tea, earl grey and others. After various tests I found that coffee and most teas stain too saturated for my liking but English breakfast left perfect grey undertones <sup>12</sup>. My reasoning for a less saturated surface was to avoid the wood appearing too fresh or lively, insinuating that the structure is new which does not uphold the concept for the piece.



11.



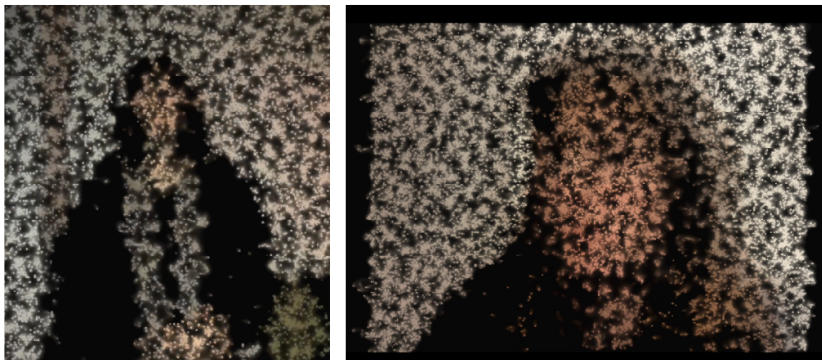
12.

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<sup>11</sup> Caroline Shank, *Stain vs No Stain in Roots Disturb Concrete* March 10th 2025

<sup>12</sup> Nathaniel Drew. "Why Modern Art Is So Expensive." YouTube, uploaded by Nathaniel Drew, July 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbTspnlZSzQ>.

There is a unique way our minds visually alter our memories, the ability to do so varies from person to person. Some refer to this aptitude as the work of one's Mind's Eye which we attribute to the creation of images in our head. A common way to test your Mind's Eye is to try visualizing a cow... okay now, visualize the cow spinning... and now, visualize the cow being abducted by aliens. Some people don't have the ability to simply envision a cow in the 2nd dimension while others are able to take the cow and shoot it into space. Now why do I mention this? In the context of this piece, how do I bring to life a visual distortion of the mind? After countless critiques and studio visits I have come to the somewhat obvious and ironic conclusion that what the audience sees when they peer into the structure is something that feels familiar yet all together never been seen before. This is obvious in the sense that of course as an artist I'd like to create something so unique and never been done before and ironic in the sense that it should feel known. Before this 'discovery,' I had envisioned a particle effect that would gradually consume the viewers silhouette as the they observed—a technique I've previously explored in my interactive piece *Lighthouse*<sup>13</sup>, where live visuals dissipate into particles as you attempt to move closer to the piece.



13.

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<sup>13</sup> Caroline Shank, *Lighthouse*, Interactive Installation, TouchDesigner, Arduino, 2023.

I was originally drawn to the ambiguity of the silhouettes that form once the visual had completely dissipated into debris an effect that can be seen in Olivia Rodrigo's Bad Idea Right? Music video directed by the iconic Petra Collins<sup>14</sup>. I often find myself returning to this meme I had come across doom scrolling the internet a few years ago of a poor quality TikTok of an old woman who appeared blurry and distant with a comment by a random viewer saying *you look like a memory* <sup>15</sup>. Although funny and extremely on point, for the sake of the context I wanted to dissect the elements of this image that make this comment so true through the lens of Hito Steyrel's writing In Defense of the Poor Image . Focusing on the perception of digital images and how they decay over time, most commonly through outdated low resolutions, I began to compare this phenomenon to how a moth will eat away at clothes over time, creating holes in our favorite sweaters.



14.



15.

<sup>14</sup> Olivia Rodrigo - bad idea right? (Official Video)." YouTube, uploaded by OliviaRodrigoVEVO, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3:11>

<sup>15</sup> TikTok Meme. "You Look Like a Memory." TikTok comment, created by user 'julliette', date unknown. Screenshot.

Time has the same effect on images, as technology advances the systems that hold our current livelihoods become outdated and no longer used causing our data to compress as it moves from system to system, leaving trails of pixels behind as it does so. The idea of this *trail of pixels* is what led me to the effect utilized in the final of this piece. Achieved utilizing touchdesigner, static forms captured through the live feed appeared ordinary until motion within the environment is captured, causing a disruption in the pixels that make up the image<sup>16</sup>.

16.



*Still*

*In Motion*

Having spoken with alumni from Pratt's interactive digital arts program prior to the design of my thesis I knew making whatever I choose to create module was a top priority for me. Once I decided on the form of a house for my piece in spring of 2024 I reached out artist and contractor Bradley Milligan about creating the 6' x 6' x 7' structure. I sent my initial illustrations to Bradley with the idea that each wall would have the ability to be taken apart, transported and put back together<sup>17</sup>. He agreed

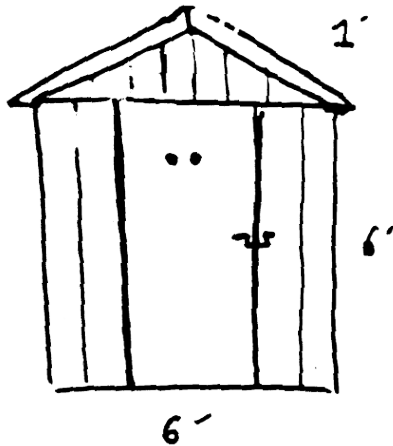
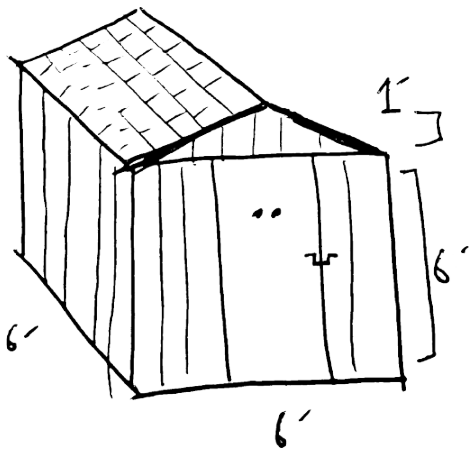
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<sup>16</sup> Caroline Shank, *Distortion Effect, still and in motion, Roots Disturb Concrete*, Touchdesigner, 2025

<sup>17</sup> Caroline Shank, *Initial Illustration, Roots Disturb Concrete* 2024

having worked with past MFA students that module was the way to go but I should keep in mind the weight of each wall. As previously mentioned I decided that the white pine was the best option for this logistically. By December of 2024 the first install of the structure had taken place in my studio. Each piece could be easily lifted using one hand and the structure could be assembled and disassembled within 20 minutes. On top of that the entire piece fit inside the back of Bradley's mini van.

17.



To the effect created by Marcel Duchamp in *Etant Donnes*, when looking through the peep holes I wanted to create a similar sense of ambiguity in my experience. When looking into Duchamp's piece you will notice it appears that the scene is framed by what looks like a hole that was created in a brick wall (See page 2 illustration 1). As seen in this recreation of the innards of the work by Serkan Özkaya, there is a false wall



framing the scene between the door and the diorama<sup>18</sup>. Combining this technique with my interpretation of Eva Hesse's use of tendrils as a way to communicate life I chose to frame the visuals using an angel vine wreath that creeps into the viewers line of site<sup>19</sup>.

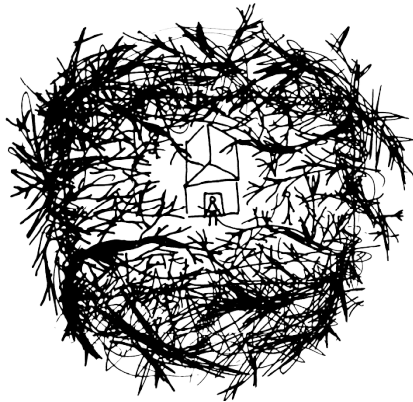
18.




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<sup>18</sup> Serkan Özkaya recreation of Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas). 1946–1966, May 16, 2019. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-duchamps-work-hold-one-final-secret>.

<sup>19</sup> Caroline Shank, *Illustration, construction, final effect Roots Disturb Concrete*, pen/paper, angel vine, touchdesinger 2025



19.

For the webcam component of the piece I chose to use my iPhone's continuity camera instead of a traditional webcam to avoid having visible wires extending from the structure. Maintaining a clean, uninterrupted aesthetic was crucial to preserving the piece's immersive quality. Achieving the desired framing required the camera to be either suspended or mounted at a high position, which would have made concealing cables even more challenging. The wireless functionality of the continuity camera allowed me to maintain the intended visual integrity while ensuring the setup remained discreet and unobtrusive, although I had to sacrifice my personal phone to remain in the gallery for three days, I still think it was worth.

When first approaching how to achieve the desired interaction I immediately assumed that I would utilize an ultrasonic sensor to distinguish whether or not someone was approaching the piece. The pros to this approach were that I had already worked with the sensor in a similar way and it would be easy to do again. The cons on the other

hand were that the sensor is a difficult piece of hardware to conceal and would call for alterations to the structure itself to hide such a small piece. Deciding then that the sensor was unnecessarily clunky in logistical terms I turned to the idea of employing AI body recognition. The pros for this option were that the trigger would operate off of the same program that would be creating the visual distortions meaning no second party software and zero hardware all together. On the flip of this, I had never worked with such a complex AI system in Touchdesigner such as the one needed to achieve this called Mediapipe, but now felt like the time to push myself, and that I did. Though it felt like the most ideal rout to take in the end to track the specific joint coordination to determine whether a body was in the correct place revealed to be too difficult and felt like a long round about way to achieve something very simple. Following this failed approach I turned to blob tracking which revealed to be not reliable enough to carry out my desired function.

Running out of options and time, I turned to color tracking, an environmental trigger that I had been avoiding since the start of the project. This is because to employ color tracking I would have to use a colored decal somewhere on or around the piece that would act almost as a button. I feared that the decal, which had to stand out in order to function, would take viewers out of the experience causing them to focus on what they're *supposed* to be doing and not experiencing the piece. It wasn't until the piece was finally up in One Art Space till I was sold on the decision to use a decal. I watched for the first time as someone other than myself experienced the



piece and noticed that no one paid any mind to the red star at the foot of the door, in retrospect, how could you? There's a giant shack sitting in the middle of the gallery <sup>20</sup>.



20.

The act of romanticizing is a vital process of self preservation, enabling us to make sense of the chaotic and often painful nature of life. As our minds sift through the vastness of memory, we curate our pasts, reshaping them to fit a narrative that offers comfort and meaning, even in the face of terror. *Roots Disturb Concrete* serves as a reminder of the life or death instinct to find purpose.

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<sup>20</sup> Caroline Shank, *Star Decal Roots Disturb Concrete*, Vinyl 2025

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1. Duchamp, Marcel. *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas). 1946–1966, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.
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