

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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## NATIONAL GALLERY ACQUIRES TWENTIETH-CENTURY SCULPTURE

Washington, D.C., November 20, 1989--National Gallery of Art director J. Carter Brown announced today that three outstanding sculptures have just been acquired as gifts of the Collectors Committee. Lever No. 3, 1989, by Martin Puryear; Untitled, 1989, by Joel Shapiro; and Mirrored Cell, 1969/1988, by Lucas Samaras and are now on display. The Puryear and the Samaras are in the atrium of the East Building and the Shapiro is temporarily installed in the north garden court of the East Building. They are the first works by each of the artists in the National Gallery collection.

"We are delighted to number these important works, each very different and by American artists not previously represented in the National Gallery, in the nation's collection," said Mr. Brown. "The generosity of the Collectors Committee has again added greatly to our holdings of twentieth-century art, for which we are most grateful," he added.

The Collectors Committee of the National Gallery is a group of donors who have met annually since 1977 to make gifts of twentieth-century art to the permanent collection.

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Lever No. 3 takes the form of a long curving handle attached to a narrow base. The sculpture is made of stacked pieces of ponderosa pine that have been laminated together, carved, and painted. The bent handle narrows slightly as it curves out from the base, extending more than seven feet. The sculpture simultaneously suggests mechanical, animal, and vegetable forms, although no single idea dominates. Lever No. 3 reflects the artist's interest in early industrial/mechanical forms, African, and non-Western art, as well as his extraordinary mastery of wood carving and joining. Mr. Puryear was the 1989 grand prize winner at the São Paulo, Brazil, Bienal and recent winner of a MacArthur Foundation fellowship.

Joel Shapiro's cast bronze Untitled has forceful abstract qualities, yet at the same time suggests a figure balancing precariously on one leg or the intersection of two figures. Its striking cantilever seems to defy gravity, and indeed the sculpture stands only with the aid of invisible, below-ground anchors. A consistent figurative reading of Untitled is impossible, as the viewer's attention is constantly drawn to the shapes and weight of the cast blocks, the ways in which they intersect, and the angles at which they are attached. Untitled has been carefully cast so that the grain of its original wooden mold remains visible. Joel Shapiro is a distinguished contemporary sculptor and his numerous exhibitions include a 1982 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and a 1985 retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Mirrored Cell is the largest and most complex of six mirrored spaces Lucas Samaras has produced since the mid-1960s. On the outside, it appears as a simple mirrored box with a door and a window. Inside, the room is mirrored from floor to ceiling and furnished with mirrored forms of a bed with bolster, headboard, and footboard; a desk with chair; a toilet; and a bedroom chest. Entering Mirrored Cell, the viewer is everywhere confronted by his or her own reflections that recede into near infinity. The experience is at once exhilarating and disorienting. The room-sized sculpture relates to several important artistic movements of the 1960s including minimalism, light art, and environmental art, but it also speaks to the expressionist concerns of the 1980s. Samaras, a painter, draftsman, photographer, and assemblage artist, is a major figure in the generation of American artists that emerged in the 1960s. He was honored with a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1972 and a 1988 retrospective organized by the Denver Art Museum seen at the National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC. Due to expected crowds over the holiday weekend, at present Mirrored Cell can be seen through its front door and side window. One or two visitors at a time will be able to enter the Mirrored Cell beginning Monday, November 27.

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# National Gallery of Art

Washington, D.C.

## MIRRORED CELL

by Lucas Samaras

American, born Greece 1936

Mirror over wood, designed in 1969, executed in 1988

Mirrored Cell by Lucas Samaras is a recent addition to the National Gallery of Art's collection of contemporary sculpture. Constructed in 1988 from plans drawn in 1969, the Mirrored Cell was first exhibited at the Pace Gallery in New York. This show coincided with a major traveling retrospective of Samaras' work organized by the Denver Art Museum. Of the three completely mirrored rooms that have been constructed, the Gallery's work is the largest and most complex.

Mirrored Cell is a box completely sheathed on the exterior and interior with mirrors. Its interior contains mirrored forms of a bed with a bolster, headboard, and footboard; a desk and chair; a low chest; and a toilet. A door and a shuttered and barred window, both operable on hinges, provide illumination when open. One is irresistibly drawn to this jewellike creation, and upon entering its glacial environment, one is engulfed in unfathomable space and dazzling reflections. Sensations arise of dislocation or disorientation, wonder, claustrophobia, enchantment, terror, or amusement. Additionally, Mirrored Cell challenges our basic assumptions of what constitutes a work of art.

As radical as Mirrored Cell seems, it relates to the artistic context of the 1960s and to events in Samaras' life. An aspiring actor and writer as well as an artist, Samaras participated in several Happenings---those events that blended the theater with the visual arts. The theatrical, stage-set quality of Mirrored Cell reflects these experiences.

Although Samaras worked with small boxes and mirrors as early as 1960, the idea of a completely mirrored room appeared in a short story, "Killman," which he wrote in 1963. A year later, when his parents returned to Greece and he moved out of their apartment for the first time, he recreated his actual bedroom in a gallery setting. The size encouraged people to walk into the room, changing the spectator's traditional role from passive viewer to active participant. The creation of this

environment related directly to ideas advanced by artists who were concerned with breaking down boundaries between high art and life, who sought to transform the isolated art object into an environmental experience accessible to the public.

Samaras' Mirrored Room of 1966, now in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, is the sequel to this ordinary bedroom. All of Samaras' mirrored spaces are linked to minimalism, a movement that rejected the expressive and gestural style of the 1950s in favor of a sleek, often machine-made, impersonal appearance. Unlike the messy, crowded original bedroom, Buffalo's Mirrored Room and Washington's Mirrored Cell respond to minimalist influences in their pristine appearance, mechanical fabrication, and seemingly anonymous style.

In addition to its connections with avant-garde movements, Mirrored Cell is an excellent example of Samaras' personal obsession with artistic transformation which, for him, means transforming representation into abstraction or vice versa. Mirrored Cell is a dialogue between these opposites. The underlying wooden structure of the box is camouflaged with mirrors, and the object becomes part of the environment it reflects. Simultaneously, the interior makes tangible the abstract space of infinity. The mirrored furniture also sets the stage for a human presence, and thus, questions of narcissism and identity are suggested.

The sensations experienced in the Mirrored Cell come from being dislocated and from seeing one's reflection infinitely reproduced and receding into space. Unable to establish boundaries and confronted by the sharp points and cutting edges of the glass forms, a sense of danger may accompany a vertigo. Thus, emotional self-confrontation becomes the artistic experience. Mirrored Cell allows one to contemplate infinity, question spatial assumptions, metaphorically examine the wholeness or fragmentation of the self--in short, to enter a space where representation and abstraction, logic and mystery coexist. As Samaras said about his first Mirrored Room: "Most people stopped looking into mirrors long ago, having given up hope of ever entering them. Here was a chance."

SSS (1-90)

Height 108, width 157, depth 152 inches  
NGA No. 1989.73.1. Gift of the Collectors Committee

GROUND LEVEL