



JUNE LEAF'S COFFEE POT PHOTOGRAPHED BY PAOLO ROVERSI, 2021

# LUNCHEON

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# LUNCHEON

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# JUNE LEAF

Photographs by and conversation with  
**PAOLO ROVERSI**

*Photographer Paolo Roversi makes a selection of photographs of artist June Leaf that he has taken throughout their many years of friendship. From his studio in Paris and her studio in New York, they discuss her life, her work and their years of conversations together. June's coffee pot, photographed by Paolo, is featured on one of the covers of this issue of Luncheon, see page 14.*









PAOLO ROVERSI: Do you remember where we first met?

JUNE LEAF: Was it in Mabou?

PAOLO: It was in Halifax [Nova Scotia], in January 2000. Halifax was completely covered in snow. It was freezing. You'd gone to a small iron atelier where you were working.

JUNE: That's right, I was teaching there. Robert [the photographer Robert Frank, June's late husband] and I met you at the airport.

PAOLO: And we took the car to Mabou, but it was too snowy, so we had to go back and spend the night together in Halifax.

JUNE: I remember.

PAOLO: Since then we've met many times.

JUNE: Every year ...

PAOLO: ... sometimes more than once. I was thinking about the three important cities in your life: Chicago, New York and Mabou. Is that right?

JUNE: Yes, that's right.

PAOLO: They were important in different ways.

JUNE: Mabou was more important than the others.

PAOLO: Why's that?

JUNE: Chicago is a very big city. The next place I lived in was Paris, another very big city, and then New York. And then Mabou, which was a very tiny place. It was from another century, almost. It was a big change for me. It changed me entirely.

PAOLO: It's a place of meditation, where you can really isolate yourself. I loved your atelier in Mabou, it was beautiful and very different from the one in New York.

JUNE: But the work is the same, it was equal, mostly inspired by rural sculpture.

PAOLO: I remember the first time I walked into your atelier in Mabou, there was a small sheet of paper with writing on it, stuck on the wall. It read, 'Ideas make me fly.'

JUNE: It's still there, but it's half erased.

PAOLO: Which part, 'fly' or 'ideas'?

JUNE: Well, now I fly without ideas. That's the summation of the difference between now and 50 years ago. I don't need ideas anymore because I'm flying. What's better?!

PAOLO: Fantastic. A lot of your figures are flying or in space, in an emptiness. They're attached by a thread, and sometimes no thread.

JUNE: Maybe it's more dancing than flying.

PAOLO: They're a type of acrobat or equilibrist, precariously balanced.

JUNE: It's more like they're walking on a trapeze.

PAOLO: When I look at your work, I feel an obsession with movement.

JUNE: Very much so.

PAOLO: You told me once that when you were a little girl, you dreamed of having a sewing machine. Maybe this is where the movement in your sculptures comes from.

JUNE: No, not from there: it comes from dancing. From the age of six, I studied ballet twice a week. That was my mother's obsession, not mine, but I do think that this influences me to this day. I do love dancing, but I'm not a good dancer. When I was around 16, she asked my teacher if I might become a dancer. My teacher's answer was that I think too much. I liked that. I'd love to be a dancer, but I think too much.

PAOLO: That's why I like the picture of you in your sandals - it's like a dance step. (*Looking at photographs*

*of June taken by Paolo*) Do you like cinema better than theatre? Cinema seems like an important part of your work.

JUNE: Theatre! It's more important.

PAOLO: Are your scroll works theatre, for you?

JUNE: I'll explain it very simply. I want my figures and my drawings (which are usually figures too) to move, but I don't want to make a movie and I don't want to make a film. I don't like the idea that you have to go into a dark room to view it. Therefore my solution is to make the figures move, and that's why I invented the scroll. I'm still trying to make things move; I haven't achieved that. I'm still trying, every day. It's a catastrophe, I think.

PAOLO: It's not a catastrophe. I remember the last scroll I saw in your atelier in New York. It's transparent and there are figures behind it, which gives the impression of movement.

JUNE: I'm still trying.

PAOLO: Keep trying, June, keep trying! Today, in this strange world, do you think your work is affected by what happens in politics and society?

JUNE: I think the world as we knew it has collapsed. I'm collapsing at the same time. I don't want to say my age, but I was born in 1929; you can do the arithmetic. I'm collapsing too, and so we go together: the world is collapsing and I'm collapsing.

PAOLO: So you're in harmony with the world.

JUNE: Yes, we're both collapsing, and it's fine.

PAOLO: How important has art been in your life?

JUNE: I think it goes like this: you're born, you learn to walk and then the next thing is you learn to make things. I went from walking to making. That's all.

PAOLO: Which artists have influenced you the most?





Have you been touched or seduced by other artists? Have they inspired you?

JUNE: Yes. My concentration on great, great art is limited because I'm so busy working. I don't think I pay enough attention to the great artists, which is probably convenient because that way I don't have to face the reality.

PAOLO: You've worked all your life?

JUNE: I suppose.

PAOLO: Since I've known you, all you do is work. Wake up and head straight into your atelier and work.

JUNE: No, I wake up, I make breakfast ...

PAOLO: ... you make your wonderful coffee.

JUNE: We love our coffee.

PAOLO: I have some works of art by you, but the coffee pot you gave me is the most important. I love that coffee pot, it means so many things to me.

I might have asked you this already, but do you like Richard Avedon's portrait of you?

JUNE: It was a phenomenon that he came to Mabou to document Robert. I could see that he was a man who was very infatuated by great celebrities. The last thing in the world I expected was that he would take my picture. Even though I thought I was the biggest celebrity in the universe, he didn't know that! He took my picture, and he went on to make such a big fuss about it. They printed it in newspapers. My mother called me up and told me I didn't look well in the picture, I hadn't combed my hair. It was a big shock for me, like it would be for anybody.

PAOLO: I like the picture very much.

JUNE: I look at it and think it's very two-dimensional.

PAOLO: I think it's a great portrait of you; you look beautiful. It's a beautiful portrait of a woman.

JUNE: 'A beautiful portrait of a woman.' It's like the first time he ever saw a woman!

PAOLO: A real woman! I think so - after all these girls, these models, the fashion world, it might have been Avedon's first time seeing a woman. He did take a good picture of that. I like it.

JUNE: Good.

PAOLO: Are religion and faith important in your work?

JUNE: I haven't discovered it yet.

PAOLO: You're not a religious person?

JUNE: No, I haven't discovered it yet. Maybe next year.

PAOLO: What about your *Last Supper* (2009-10)?

JUNE: I don't understand how that happened.

PAOLO: You don't want to explain your work, to analyse it?

JUNE: No, no, no. No thinking! *Pas penser!*

PAOLO: Just do it. *Faire, faire, faire.*

JUNE: Exactly.

PAOLO: Before starting one of your pieces, do you begin with an idea and then get to work, or does the idea emerge as you create the work?

JUNE: That's a good question. I can't answer that. I've been making things for 73 years. Maybe this year or next year I'll stop and think about your question. Not yet.

PAOLO: Okay, so we'll have a Zoom call next year and we'll see.

JUNE: Well, next year I will have learned how to fly. I assure you, that will come true. I'll fly, and you'll come to the Zoom call and ask, 'But where is June?'

PAOLO: Will you go to Mabou this summer?

JUNE: I'll try. It's the first time in 50 years I haven't been. Because of the pandemic.

PAOLO: Is there anything special you want to say or talk about?

JUNE: No, Paolo. I'm grateful that we're still here.

PAOLO: Yes, and that we can talk together.

JUNE: This is the best. I've said everything I'm able to say.

PAOLO: You've said everything, you have nothing to add. Either way, your work speaks for you.

JUNE: It's trying. The work is separate from me. I'm just the one who does the work, but the work stands on its own. I just help it to be born.

PAOLO: You don't think it's an expression of your mind, your thoughts, your feelings?

JUNE: I don't think like that. When I go to my studio, that's when my mind starts to work. Not before and not after. When I put my hands to the materials, that's when the ideas come. It's very mysterious, I suppose.

PAOLO: Do you go into a kind of trance?

JUNE: No, it's more like my brain is in my hands.

PAOLO: I can see that when I watch you working. You're very concentrated and strong.

JUNE: My hands are separate from me.

PAOLO: Your force is incredible when you work.

JUNE: But my force is getting very quiet. If I could say anything to you that's new to me, it's that this force started at the beginning of my life, and it has become very quiet. Doesn't that make sense? It's tired. It's like the force is saying, 'Enough, put your hands down.'

PAOLO: You'll never put your hands down, I'm sure of that. It's impossible. I really miss you. I'd love to see you and cry a little bit on your shoulder.

JUNE: That's right, we cry and we laugh.

PAOLO: With a good cup of coffee.



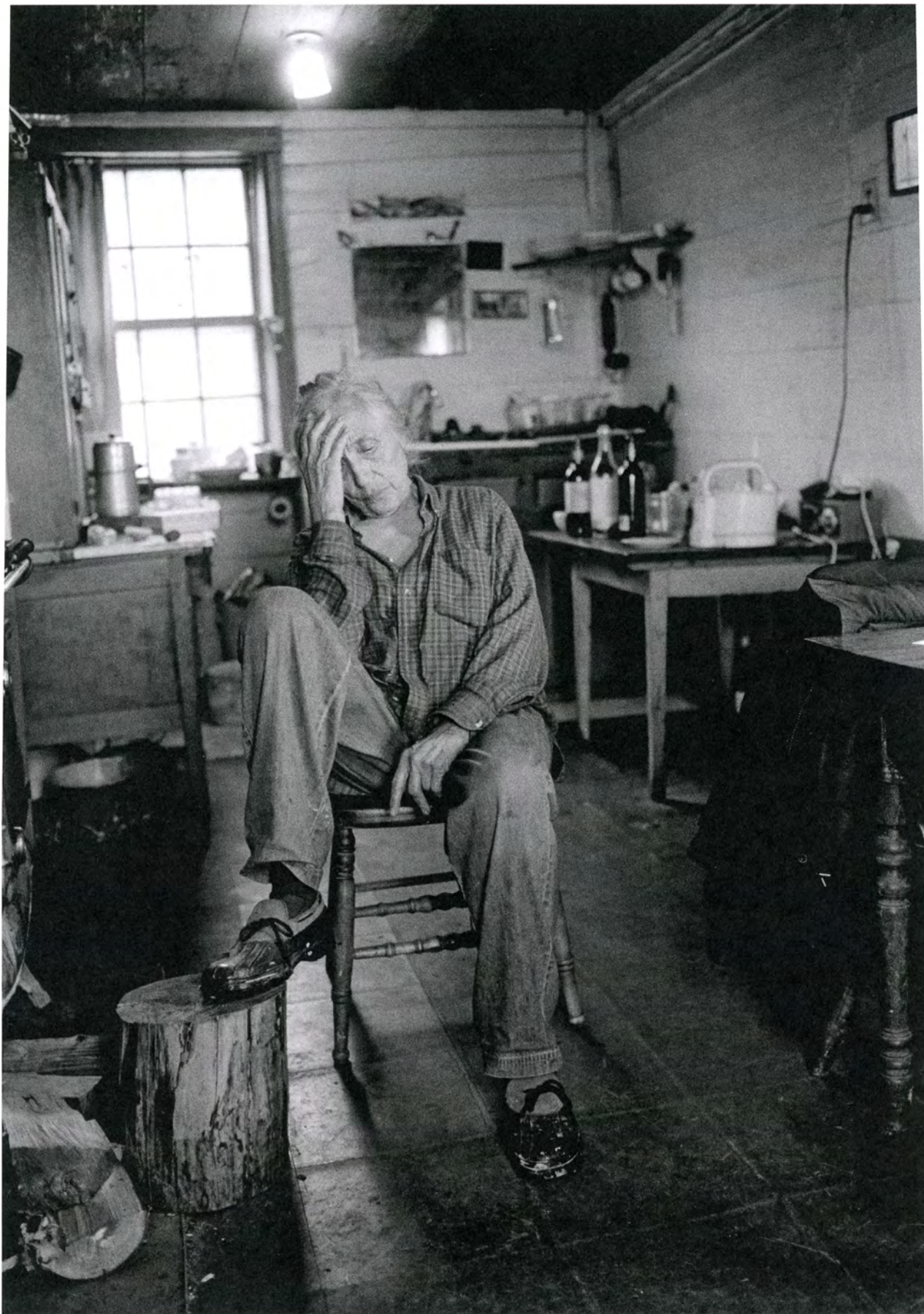




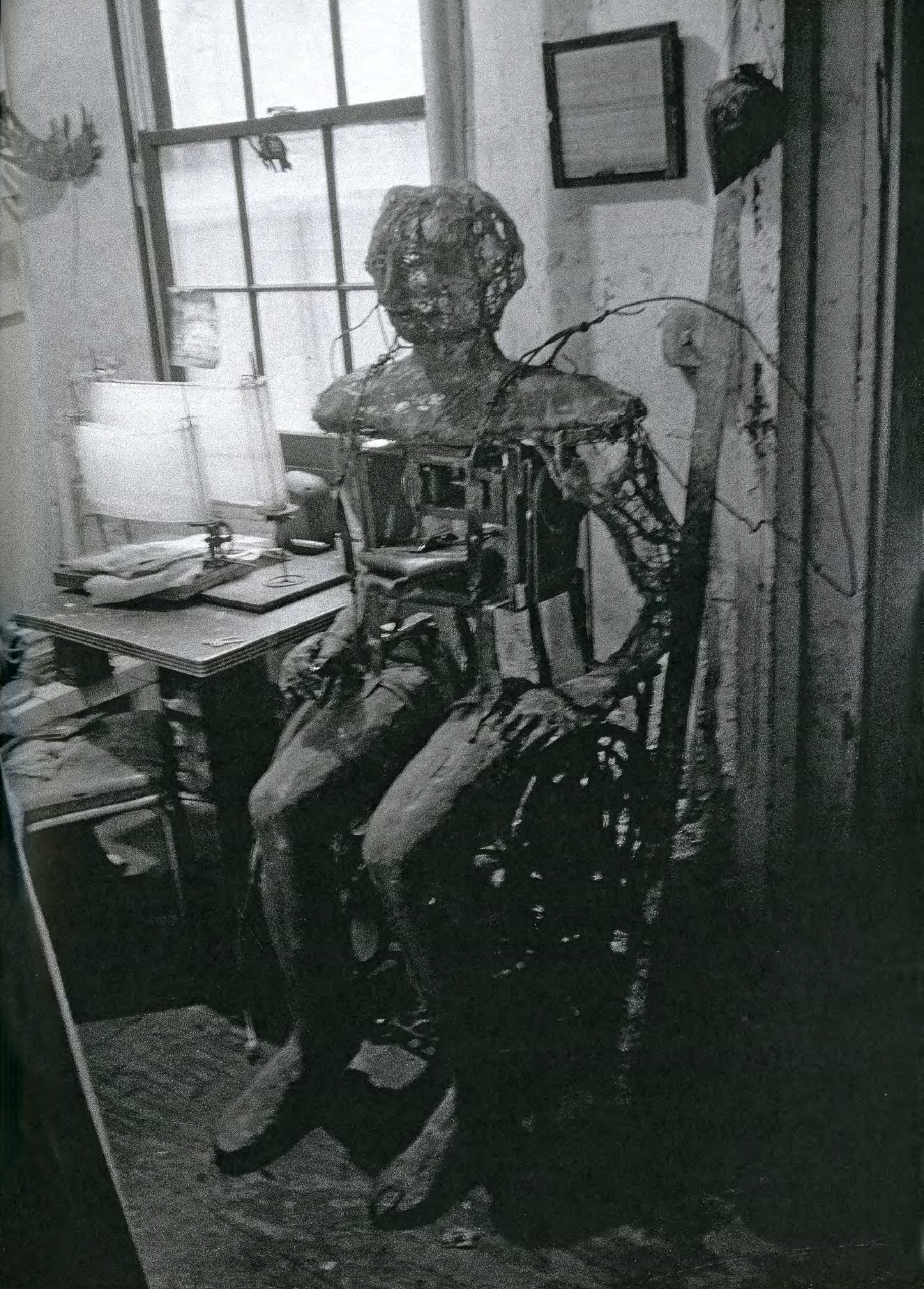












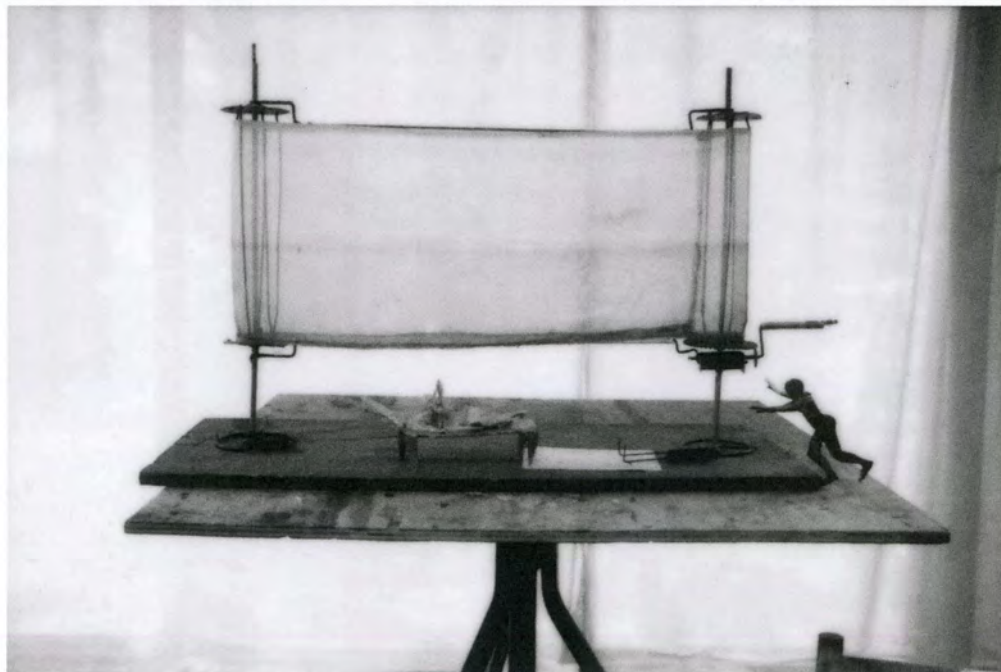
























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