

## Betty Leirner

Born in Brazil in 1959, Betty Leirner lives in Basel and São Paulo.

In June 2025, on the occasion of Photo Basel Ten, Espace\_L art contemporain Geneva, unveils Betty Leirner's photogram series *Nijinski*, never exhibited before and realized prior to her book *Squares of Light*. These works will be presented during the fair for the first time in Switzerland.

### *Squares of Light*

In 1978 B. Leirner held her first solo exhibition at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo MASP; on this occasion, her *poetographic book* *Squares of Light* was launched. Earlier, her photographs were chosen for *Grande São Paulo 1975* the first comprehensive photographic exhibition at MASP dedicated to the city. Subsequently, two of Betty Leirner's *white* photographic *patchworks* were on view in 1979 in New York at the Nobé Gallery exhibition *Contemporary Brazilian Works on Paper*.

After graduating in Film Studies in 1981 at the University of São Paulo, she moved from the city to the Alps in Germany, Italy and the Pyrenees, where her daughters Lua Felicia and Lira were born.

### *Palavra Imágica*

B. Leirner's magnetic interest in the correlations between word and image gave way to *Palavra Imágica* a project she conceived and realized at the MAC, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de São Paulo in 1987. The seminal exhibition, historical at that time, brought together approximately forty contemporary brazilian poets and artists (among others Mira Schendel, Pedro Xisto, Waldemar Cordeiro, Cildo Meireles, Hélio Oiticica, Ligia Pape and Julio Plaza) reflecting on aspects of form and visual language.

### *Prints and Filmworks*

She had solo print exhibitions and solo screenings of her filmwork at the Schauspielhaus, Filmhaus, Voelkerkunde Museum and the Kinemathek Metropolis in Hamburg, as well as group shows at the Kunsthaus Hamburg, Musée d'art moderne et contemporain Nice, Rochester Institut of Technology New York, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst Aachen,

Tate Gallery, Barbican London and Museum for Contemporary Japanese Poetry in Kitakami Japan. In Geneva, she received an honorary mention at the exhibition *La Suisse ailleurs, Autrement* Prix Michael Jordi de Photographie 1997 at the Centre Saint Gervais pour l'Image Contemporaine.

In 2006, the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo MAM exhibits B. Leirner's 16 mm. film *O Reino menos o Rei* on the 50th anniversary of *Concreta 56' a Raiz da Forma*, the first exhibition of Concrete Art and Concrete Poetry in Brazil. Unreleased since 1980, transposed by the Cinemateca Brasileira and directed with Francisco Magaldi, the film was inspired by poet Augusto de Campos' pre-concrete book *O Rei menos o Reino*.

### **Wordworks**

In 1994 with a donation grant from the Hamburger Kulturstiftung to the Literaturhaus, she was invited to conceive a word intervention ( *Satz* ) which became permanent from 1994 to 1996. Individual readings and visual presentations of her poems took place at the Theater im Friedricianum Kassel, the Bienal Brasil XX Century São Paulo, the Frankfurt Book Fair, Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin, Literaturhaus Wien and MAM Museu de Arte Moderna Rio de Janeiro among other institutions.

She then establishes her studio in Basel at the Tri-Rena area between France, Germany and Switzerland. She receives the Omanut Biennial award in Zurich for the film *Political Mistakes* in 2003 and in 2005 an endorsement for her project *Nowhereland Suisse*, from the Geneva Foundation Gertrud Schlatter/Hanni Pfister.

### **La Maison de la Poésie**

In 2007 B. Leirner opens the curatorial space *La Maison de la Poésie* in Basel with F. Kutzli, featuring a compilation of rare films by French artist and regisseur Chris Marker. In almost two decades, *La Maison de la Poésie* invited and presented for the first time in Basel guest philosophers, musicians filmmakers, artists and poets including Elisabeth Walther Bense, Alexander Wollner, Billy Childish and Agnès Varda.

### **Art Beyond Art**

In São Paulo, in 2010, a *Retrospective* of her films took place at the Cinemateca Brasileira and in 2014, Charles Cosac publishes Lucia Santaella's bilingual book *Art Beyond Art*, introducing her opus. In 2021 Rita Ficher highlights *Lovers, a Fotofilm* at Stadtkino Basel. Since the seventies, Betty Leirner works on the synthesis between concepts, tongues and languages.

fleeting white forms

The photographic patchworks shown at the 1979 exhibition *Contemporary Brazilian Works on Paper* at New York's Nobé Gallery in 1979 were from the same period as *Squares of Light*, and were curated by Regina Vater; it was one of the first exhibitions of Brazilian contemporary art on paper to be shown in New York. Betty Leirner was the youngest participant in the exhibition and Edgar Braga the oldest. Braga invited her to join a poetic partnership, from which only the cover remains, after the artist's move to Europe in 1981.

The *patchworks* and the *white photographs* are a continuation of *Squares of Light*. This sequence of images is considered to be a single image, the convergence of the whole and its parts. It is a suspended moment represented by the condensed and heightened time of each photogram. They are photographic contact prints that use entire strips of film negatives. The artist's rule is not only not to edit the contact prints; she also utilizes both sides of the negatives which produces two different kinds of positives.

An ingenious game of reversals results in a brand new syntax of depths hollowed out in the white of the paper with fine black lines that give form to sequences of inverted figures. The artist mostly used high-contrast photographic paper with almost inexistent shades of grey.

The focus turns from photograms to sequences. Just as in *Squares of Light*, although it is strictly a photographic work, the language used is not one of photography but of the moving images of film. While, in *Squares of Light*, there is a syntax of cuts and fragmentation, the *Patchworks* put forward a syntax of repetition, addition and inversion.

The overriding theme is the negatives, the foundation of the essence of photography and film as inversions of appearance, resulting in a white flight of definite forms. The expressive parts of the face - the eyes and mouth, or of the body - crossed arms, feet together - are repeatedly shown against a white background, and give a delicate and ghostly effect.

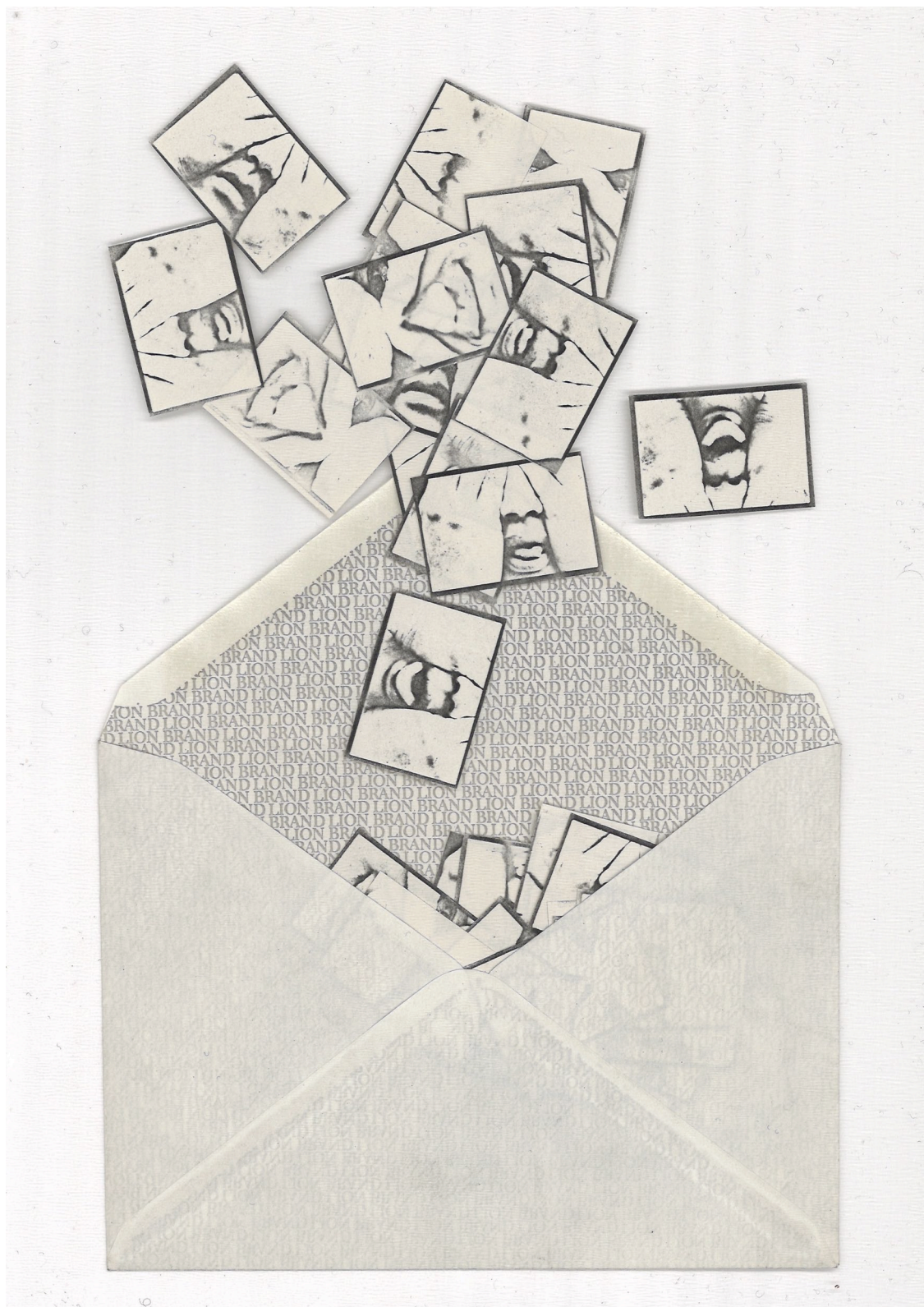
Far from seeking to describe things that have an autonomous existence beyond the presented images, the artist has taken the reproductive nature of photography to the extreme. In a world of images, the copy of the copy of the copy reflects Gertrud Stein's "a rose is a rose is a rose". The failure of photographic unity is taken to its limits. Multiple, reproductive, and repetitive, these images destabilize the idea of originality, and make the meeting of positive/ negative and negative/ negative into art that is truest to photography.

Lucia Santaella | Betty Leirner Art Beyond Art | in Chapter 1  
Photofilms | © 2014 Cosac Naify São Paulo Brasil

**SON'S FREEDOM (1979)**

**unique | framed | signed | première**

**29,7 X 21 cm | mixed media ON VIEW AT STUDIO**



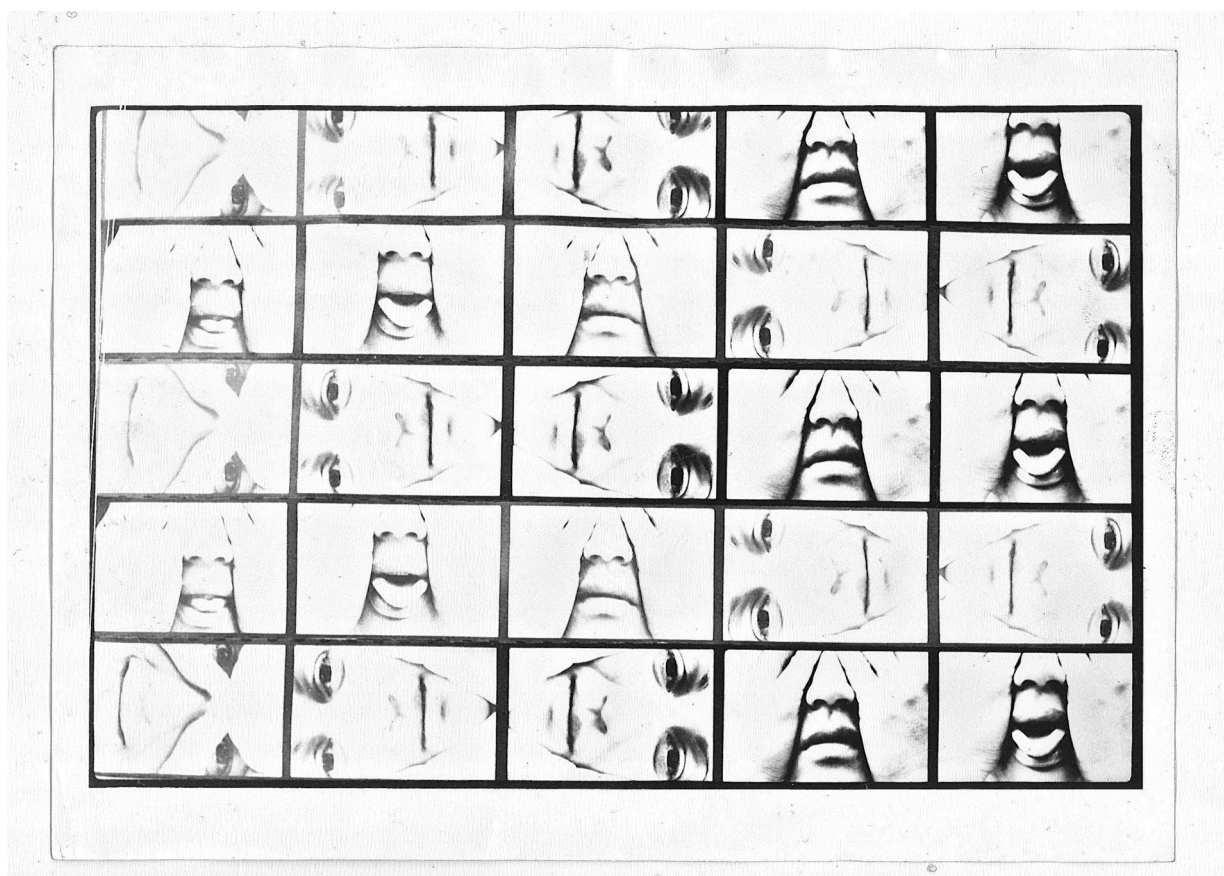
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**PATCHWORK ( NEW YORK ) (1979)**

**unique | framed | signed | 29,7 X 21 cm | original photograph**  
**ON VIEW AT THE STUDIO**





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**SQUARES OF LIGHT MERGE (2025)**

**| signed | lettered | 29,7 X 21 cm | PRINT EDITION**

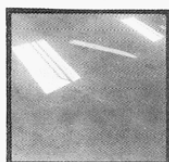
**| A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | ON VIEW AT THE FAIR**



**SQUARES OF LIGHT TEN VIRGIN OBJECT BOOKS (1978)**  
**A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | ON VIEW AT THE FAIR**

**signed | lettered | 18,5 X 18,5 cm | 36 single pages in a box**  
**see artistbook' sample below (fifteen pages)**





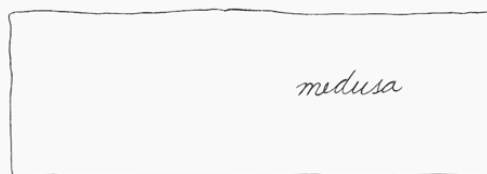
*squares of light*

mil novecentos e setenta sete  
oito

*we never did too much talking anyway*





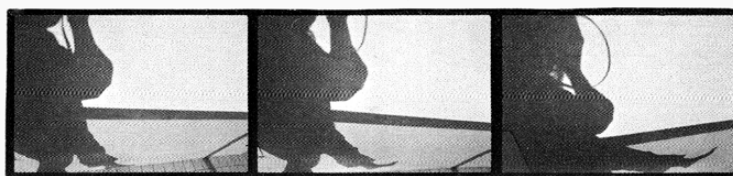




*isa - dance siamoise*

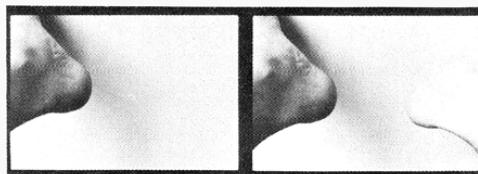


*danse des fantômes*





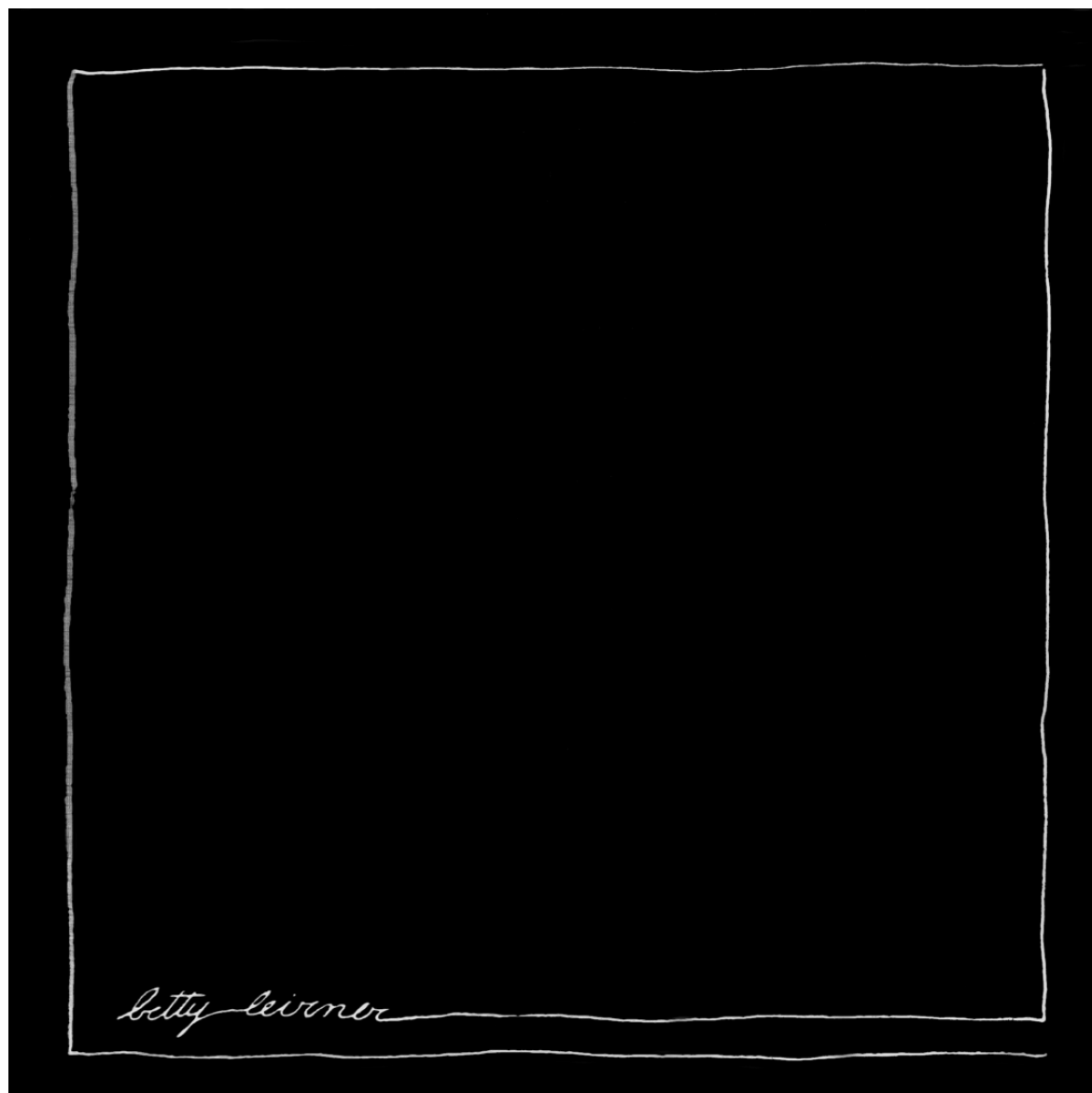
*don't think twice, it's alright*



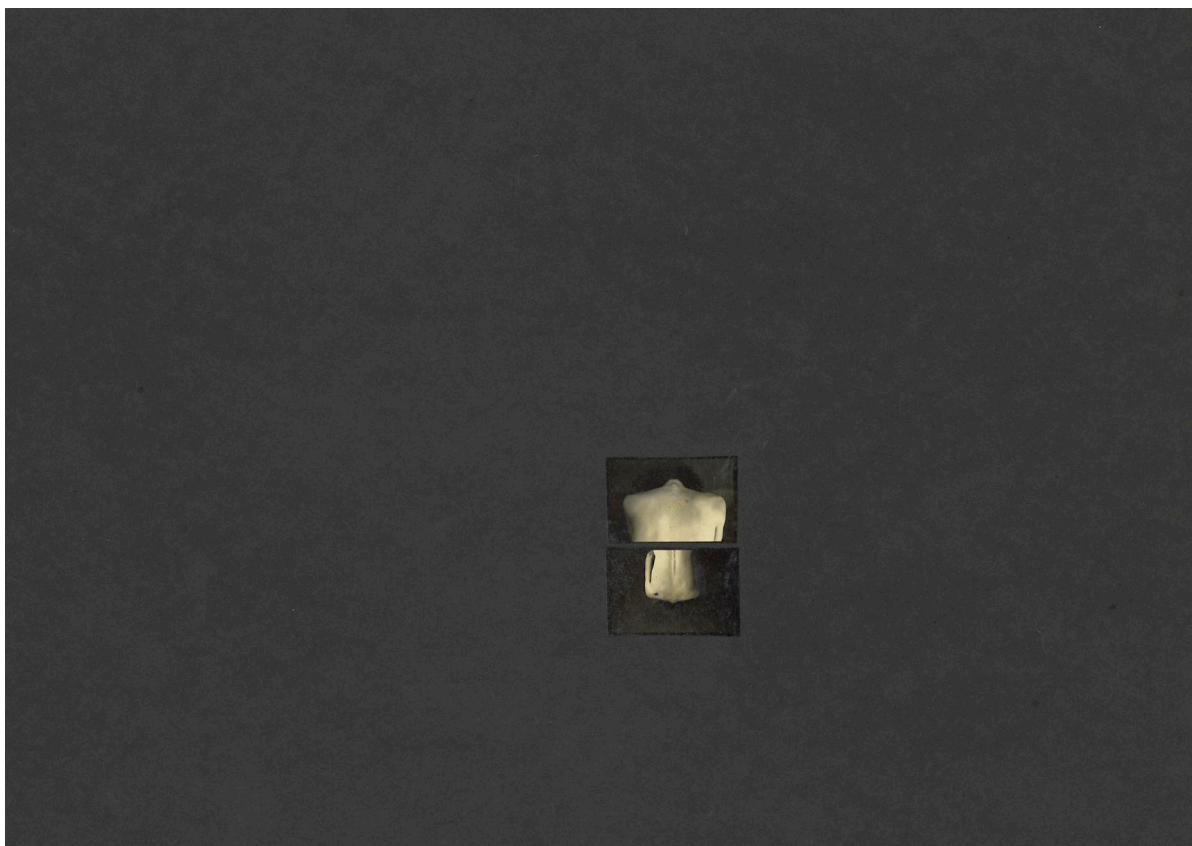


*São Paulo Brasil 1978 © BL*

PORTRAIT BY EIDE FELDON



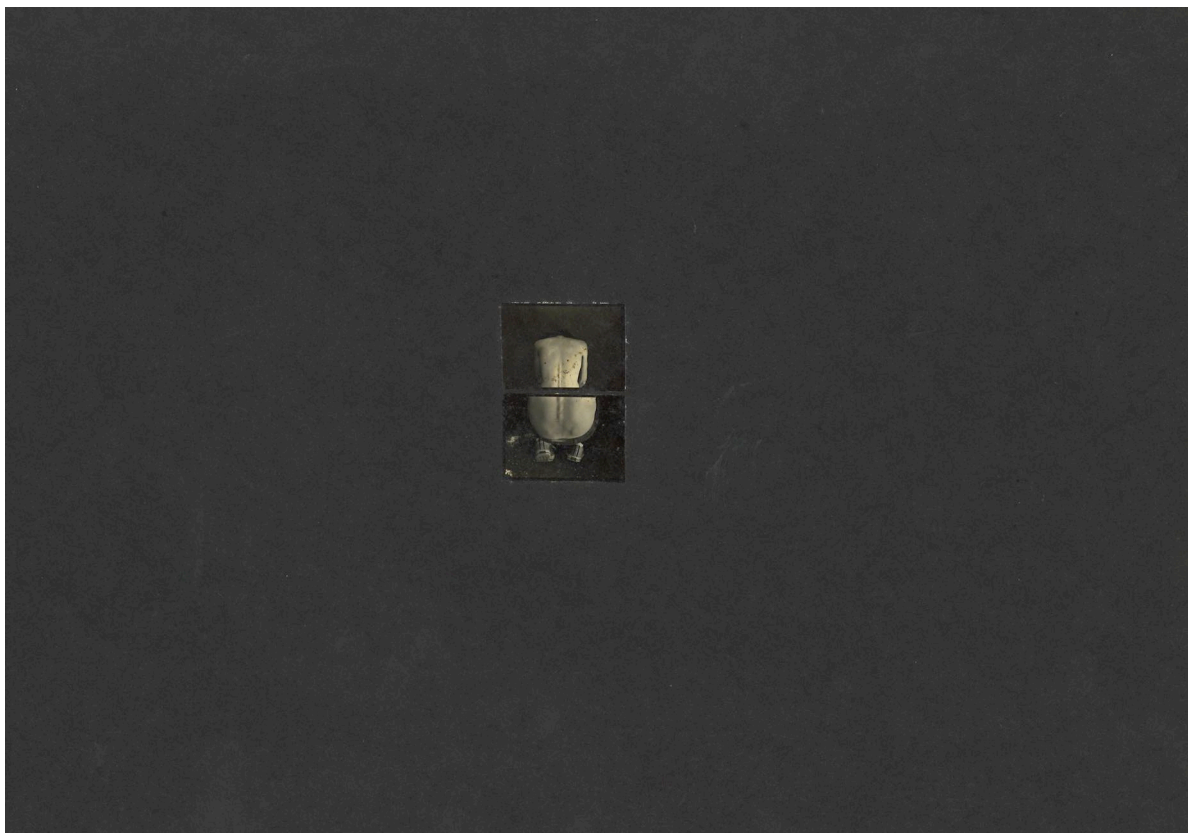
NIJINSKI SERIES ( NINE )  
PHOTOGRAMS ON CARDBOARD 1977  
framed | signed | 38,5 X 20 cm |  
ON VIEW AT THE FAIR



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NIJINSKI SERIES ( EIGHT )  
PHOTOGRAMS ON CARDBOARD 1977  
unique | framed | signed | 38,5 X 20 cm  
ON VIEW AT THE FAIR





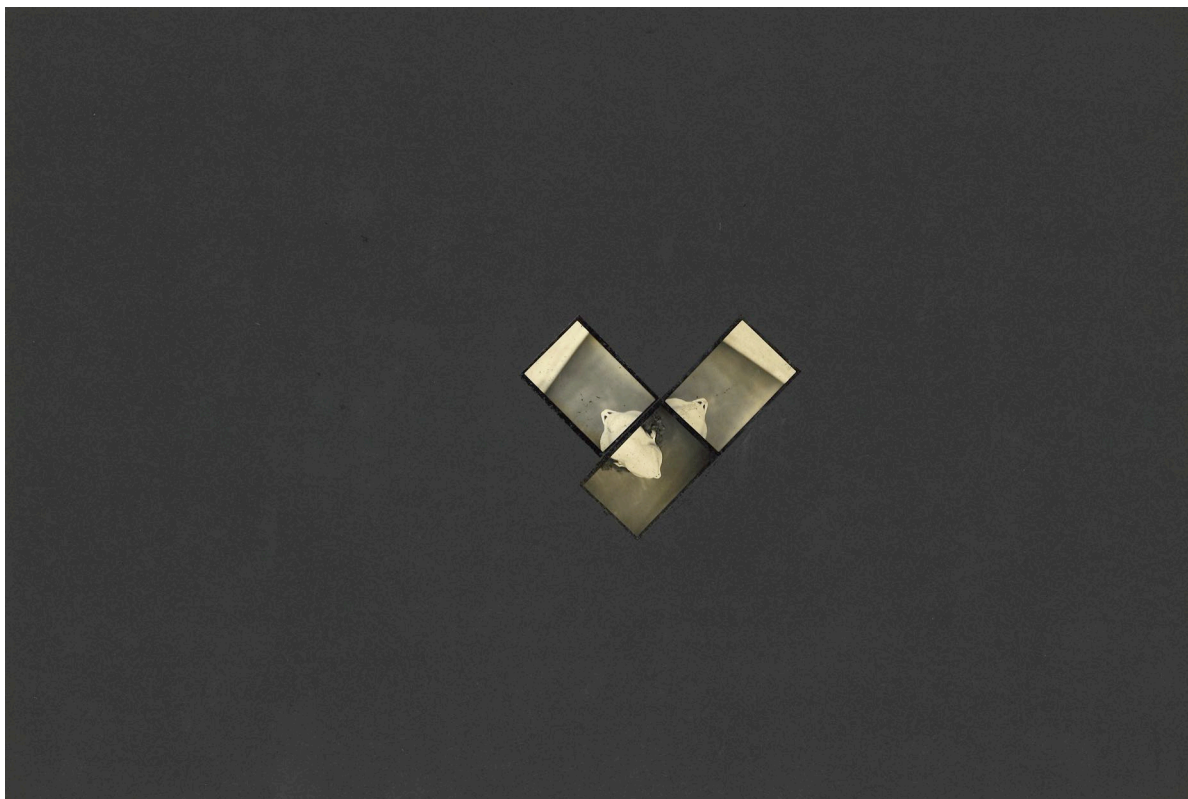
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NIJINSKI SERIES ( SEVEN )  
PHOTOGRAMS ON CARDBOARD 1977  
unframed | signed | 38,5 X 20 cm | ON VIEW AT STUDIO



©2025 Betty Leirner Prolitteris Zürich

NIJINSKI SERIES ( FIVE )  
PHOTOGRAMS ON CARDBOARD 1977  
unframed | signed | 38,5 X 20 cm | ON VIEW AT STUDIO



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ürich

NIJINSKI SERIES ( ONE TWO THREE SIX TEN )  
PHOTOGRAMS ON CARDBOARD 1977  
unframed | signed | 38,5 X 20 cm | ON VIEW AT STUDIO



PHOTO BASEL TEN - STAND A8  
SQUARES OF LIGHT

VOLKSHAUS JUNE 17 – JUNE 22 2025  
PREVIEW : JUNE 16 REBGASSE 12 - 14 4058 BASEL

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