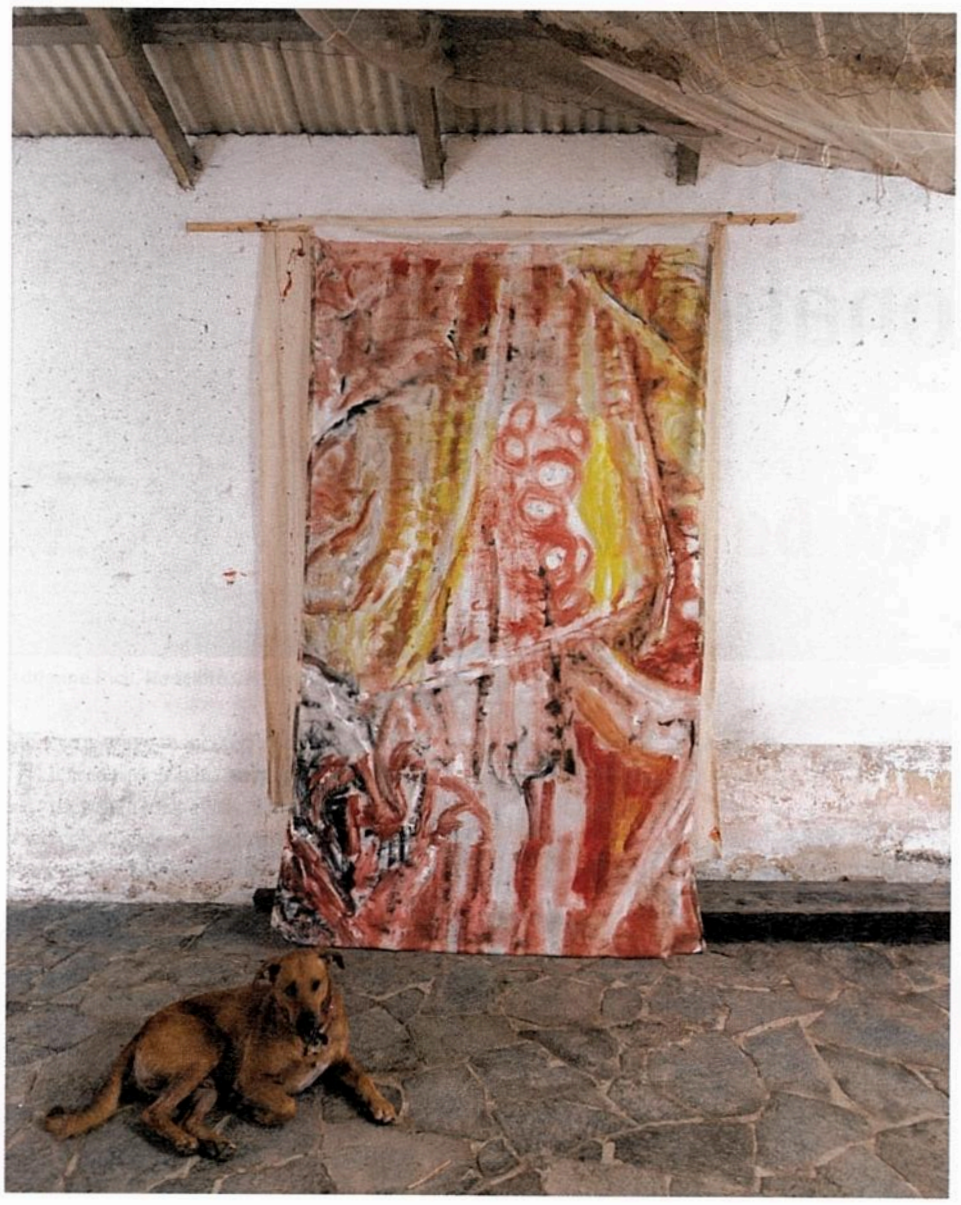
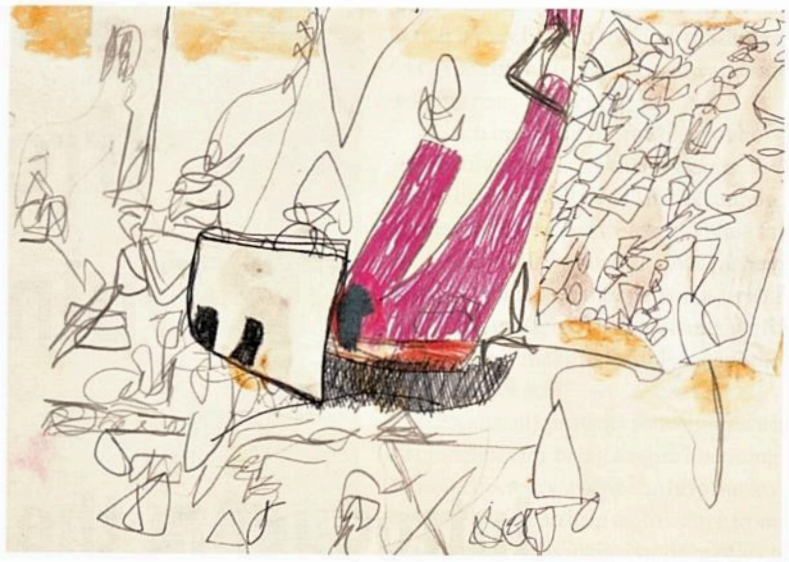
Artful Volumes

BOOKFORUM CONTRIBUTORS ON THE SEASON'S OUTSTANDING ART BOOKS.





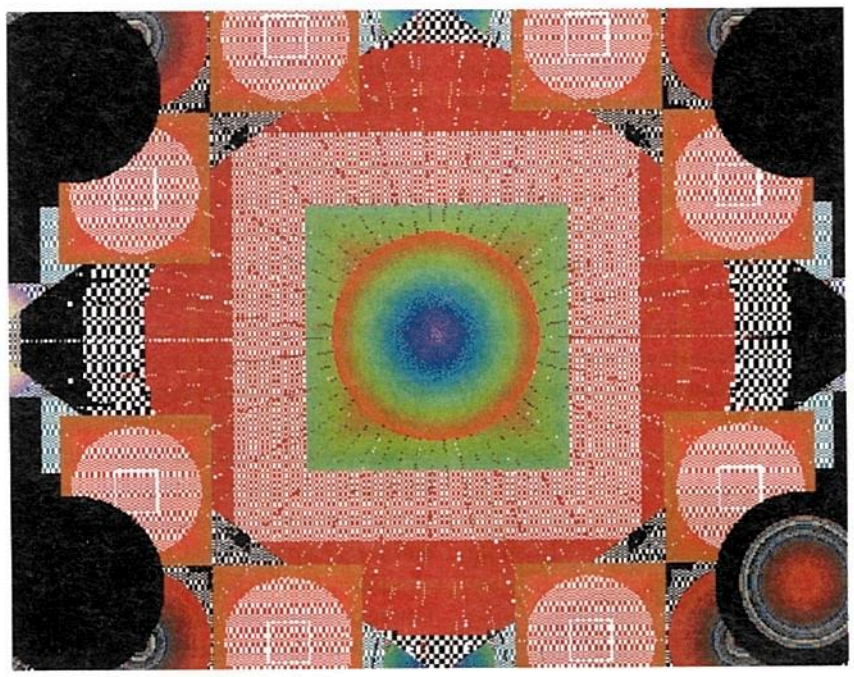
Clockwise, from left: **View of Vivian Suter's studio, Panajachel, Guatemala, 2018. Eva Hesse, untitled, 1962,** collage, ink, color pencil, and graphite on paper, 8⅞ × 12". **Polaroid of April Dawn Alison, ca. 1970s–'80s.**

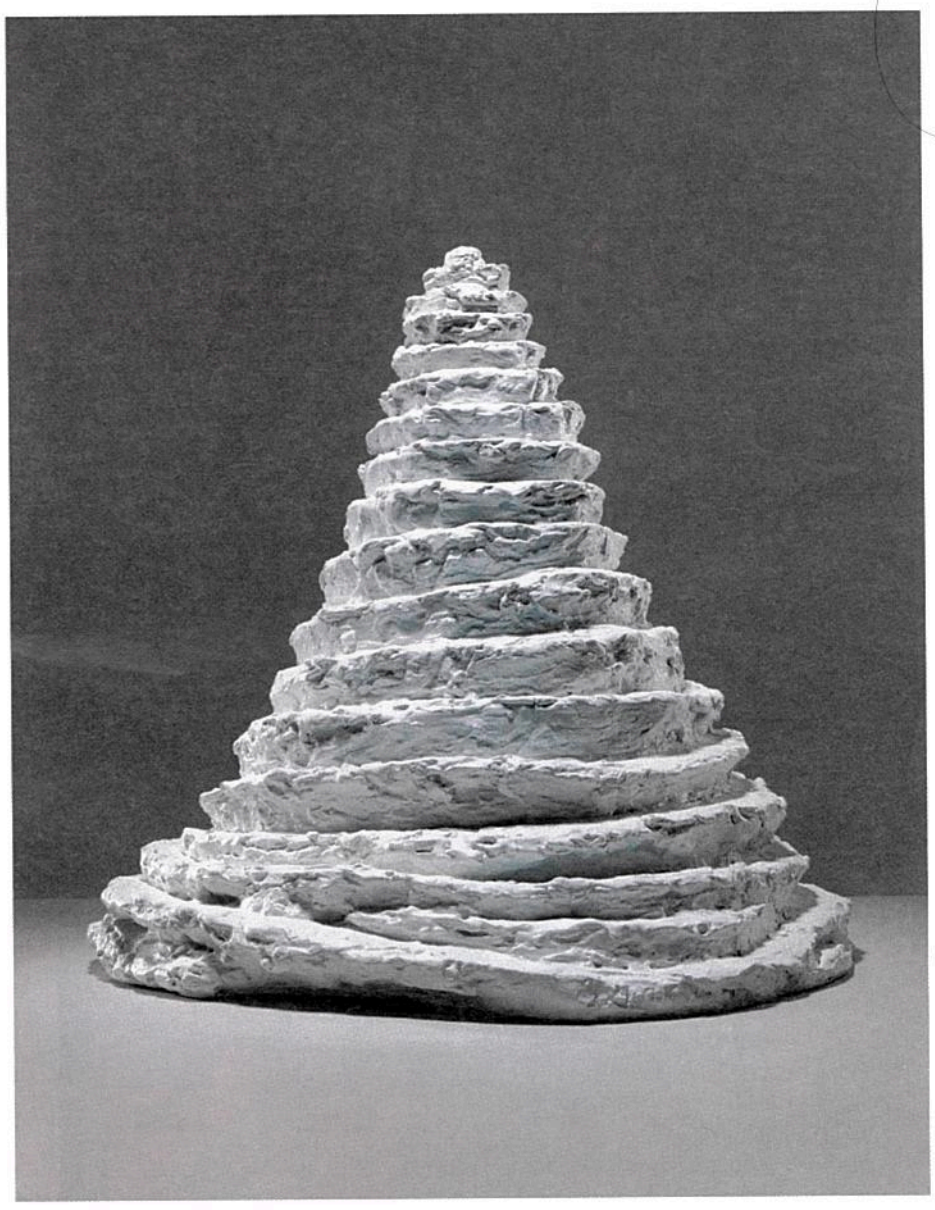
In 2005, Hurricane Stan wreaked havoc on Guatemala, triggering catastrophic mudslides, including one that ravaged artist Vivian Suter's studio. Born in Buenos Aires but raised in Basel, Suter had sought refuge from her growing stardom on the Swiss art scene by decamping to the jungles of Panajachel in 1983. But one does not pick and choose which aspects of nature one "returns" to. In drenching her canvases with mud, the hurricane freed the artist even more radically from existing conventions dictating how paintings should look and function. Suter promptly stopped treating her works as precious objects to be protected and instead opened them up to the elements to make peace with their own precariousness. Her forms swarm and dissipate; her colors barely commit themselves to the canvas, which remains unstretched. Rather than reduce nature to a fixed image, the painter conjures the cycles of destruction and regeneration at its core.

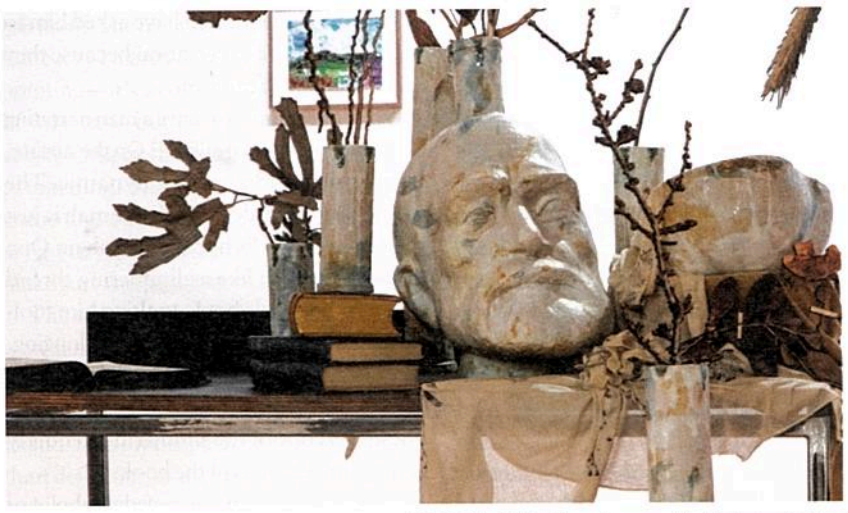
Published on the occasion of "*La Canícula*" (Dog Days)—Suter's recent solo exhibition at The Power Plant, Toronto's public gallery—this catalogue, **VIVIAN SUTER (Hatje Cantz, $65)**, embarks into the wilds of the artist's practice. There's a pronounced sociability to the publication, which collects essays by curators Adam Szymczyk and Hendrik Folkerts, a conversation between Suter and fellow painter R. H. Quaytman, and "Reflections" from artists including Rosalind Nashashibi, Miriam Cahn, and Moyra Davey, who fondly recall first encounters in hotel lobbies, broken wineglasses at dinners, and breakfasts of papaya with lime. Punctuating these vignettes are full-page reproductions of the paintings, photographed in situ in the artist's mud-spattered studio. Lacking captions, the paintings themselves appear as sundry houseguests, with little connecting them formally beyond their transitory character. In one, an electric-blue eye swims in the iris of a larger ocular shape, which sits in a lake of vermilion and black; in another, a faint chartreuse stain collects in the bottom left corner of the canvas, beneath a swooning stroke of white and cornflower blue. A third pits a bright yellow mass, its form reminiscent of a dragonfly, against a swath of fiery orange. As writer Michael Hugentobler observes, these aren't paintings that take you by the hand, but if you're lucky, they might keep you company. —KATE SUTTON

The Svalbard Global Seed Vault—colloquially referred to as the "Doomsday Vault"—is a cryogenic Hail Mary for preserving the planet's biogenetic diversity. In 2015, the vault made headlines when it granted its first withdrawal not in the postapocalyptic future, but rather a mere seven years after its founding. The International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) made the request as it tried to reestablish itself in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley after being forced to abandon 140,000 seed samples in its former home in Aleppo, Syria. Artist Jumana Manna tracked multiple facets of this exchange—from the teenage refugees working the fields to the globally scaled genetic terrorism waged by Big Agriculture—for her 2018 feature, *Wild Relatives*. The film was the centerpiece of "A Small Big Thing," the artist's solo exhibition at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Norway. The show also included a selection of recent sculptures, as well as Manna's previous investigation into taxonomical politics, *Post Herbarium* (2016), a body of work named after the collected specimens of nineteenth-century botanist George E. Post. In the accompanying catalogue, **JUMANA MANNA: A SMALL BIG THING (Sternberg Press, $27)**, essays by curators Ana María Bresciani and Ruba Katrib explore the correspondences between *Wild Relatives* and Manna's sculptural practice, with its fixation on voids and hollows, in the form of oversize armpits or *khabyas*, the traditional Levantine storage chambers (which the artist sees as a kind of proto–seed bank). Manna's preference for stark plaster finishes invites archaeological comparisons, suggesting her forms are ready-made relics. But the "antiquity" at the heart of this show is our own. As a conversation between the artist and agronomist Salvatore Ceccarelli, a former researcher at ICARDA, reveals, while agriculture may be the cornerstone of civilization, it could also prove its undoing. —K. S.

From the shape of galaxies to that of a snail's shell, from some of the oldest petroglyphs to the art of Hilma af Klint, the spiral is ubiquitous in art and nature and transfixing to the human eye. Louise Bourgeois's fascination with its swirling geometry was enough to warrant **SPIRAL (Damiani, $50)**, an entire volume devoted to her myriad inventions upon this archetypal form. In bronze, plaster, marble, ink, and paint she reproduced spirals in ways that are sometimes immediately recognizable, sometimes less so: A suite of woodcuts draws the viewer into a familiar vortex, while a tangled skein of resin-fixed hemp suggests either the formation or dissolution of a spiral. Bourgeois's attention to the shape's sprung compression of energy and potential for release is aptly forceful. The sculpture *Nature Study* depicts a snakelike coil around an unmistakably phallic object resting on a rough-hewn slab of marble. Tension, constraint, and implacability are all in dynamic play as they heighten the sexual implications and generate a sense of vigorous struggle. Even as Bourgeois varies her works' materials and imagery, she consistently evokes an underlying vibration, the feeling of being engulfed or resisting a vertiginous dream. "The spiral is a vacuum," she writes in one of the texts included in the volume. "It represents







Clockwise, from top left: **Brian Eno, *Blisses 1–87; Koans 1–29*, 2000**, digital video, color, sound, indefinite duration. **Louise Bourgeois, *Lair*, 1962**, paint on bronze, 22 × 22 × 22". **Jumana Manna, *Vase with Festoon of Flowers and Dictionary*** (detail), **2016**, lab table, ceramic set based on the bust of George E. Post, woodprints of biblical flora from the *Post Herbarium* books, dimensions variable.

something . . . the void, the anxiety void, the void of anxiety." —ALBERT MOBILIO

Oberlin College, America's first coed liberal-arts institution, was as forward-looking in twentieth-century art collecting as it was in enrolling women (way back in 1833). In 1970, immediately after Eva Hesse's death, the school's Allen Memorial Art Museum purchased Hesse's *Laocoön* (1966), becoming the first museum to acquire a Hesse sculpture. **EVA HESSE: OBERLIN DRAWINGS** (Hauser & Wirth, $60), out this summer, collects the exploratory sketches Hesse made while envisioning *Laocoön*, presenting them alongside many others from the college's 1,500-item Hesse archive. The book begins with a selection of figure drawings and watercolors of flower arrangements from Hesse's early art-student days (a reminder that many of our most beloved abstractionists were once required to draw from life) before presenting brilliant pink and orange studies made in Josef Albers's class, as well as a few Man Ray–esque photograms. In 1959, Hesse arrived in New York and her artwork became more abstract; *Eva Hesse: Oberlin Drawings* includes the now well-known gouaches in shades of black and brown she produced en masse while living in the West Village. The last ten years of Hesse's drawings are dynamic negotiations between representation and abstraction, color and achromia, especially the suite of cartoons made in collaboration with German children in 1964. As Naomi Spector once wrote of Hesse's Minimal late-period ink-on-graph-paper drawings, "they are not plentiful but they are unforgettable." *Oberlin Drawings* offers a generous and indelible assortment of works on paper from a visionary woman, gone too soon. —CANADA CHOATE

The discovery of a posthumous body of artwork relishes the revelation of a secret self—the Vivian Maiers and Henry Dargers lurking among ordinary laborers. In the case of April Dawn Alison, the alter ego of Alan Schaefer, an Oakland commercial photographer who died in 2008, two previously unknown personas emerge, one of them distinctly female.

April Dawn Alison (and, in one winking nod, April Dawn Avedon) is the name marked on boxes full of some nine thousand Polaroids rescued from Schaefer's apartment by an appraiser. Little information is available about Schaefer, but in its absence, Alison's mystique grows.

In a new book collecting these images, **APRIL DAWN ALISON** (Mack, $45), artist Zackary Drucker places the work in a lineage of trans photography, while the book's editor, Erin O'Toole, frames it in terms of cross-dressing photography, such as the drag self-portraits of Andy Warhol. The work is closest to that of Cindy Sherman—as Alison transforms via wigs, makeup, and costumes into outsize female-presenting characters framed within deliberately conceived narrative worlds. She's a camp catalogue queen wielding a vacuum cleaner, or—in a feminist critique—a dishwashing domestic prisoner harnessed to a kitchen sink. Over decades, that kitchen grows as familiar as the brown carpet on which Alison poses, legs sprawled out in stylized, sexualized shots.

Alison worked in Polaroid—"that medium of immediate sadness or gratification," as Hilton Als writes in his accompanying essay. Joy and melancholy coexist in her pictures, evidence of an exuberant inner life that might never have escaped the frame. —REBECCA BENGAL

Dating back to the first half of the 1970s, when he played in Roxy Music as a "sound manipulator," Brian Eno has married soothing avant-garde with jagged pop—a sensibility that has made him the perfect recording-studio partner for the likes of David Bowie, Devo, and David Byrne (among many others). Eno, who never quite outgrew art school, embraces accidents, process above product, and what he calls "incompetence," which, for him, just means whatever you don't know you know yet. This approach has led to more than a few musical breakthroughs: He's credited with inventing the ambient genre (on the aptly titled *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*); is a pioneer of generative music ("music created by a system"); and, in 1974–75, released a trio of classic, unclassifiable solo albums (*Here Come the Warm Jets*, *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)*, and *Another Green World*), to name just the top-line CV achievements. As a visual artist, he's much less known, and a little less interesting. His earliest works, collected in the career-spanning survey **BRIAN ENO: VISUAL MUSIC** (Chronicle Books, $28), are 1960s-era Fluxus-esque typewritten pages; in the late 2000s, he created iOS apps, having made videos, installations, and light art in the intervening years. Eno is a gear guy, a technology savant—whether it is a recording studio, a typewriter, or an iPhone—who alertly takes cues from tools that are slightly out of his control. *77 Million Paintings* (2006) is software-based art that collages and kaleidoscopes 296 visual works, creating near-endless permutations that drift to an ambient soundtrack. It's sold on DVD, has been displayed on large digital screens at various venues including the Venice Biennale, and was once projected on the outside of the Sydney Opera House. The optical effects register as both therapeutic and corporate, like Spotify-core for the eyes. It looked cool on the opera house, to be sure, but it makes the most sense playing on a work laptop while you eat lunch at your desk. —DAVID O'NEILL