

Margit Szilvitzky (1931-2018)

acb



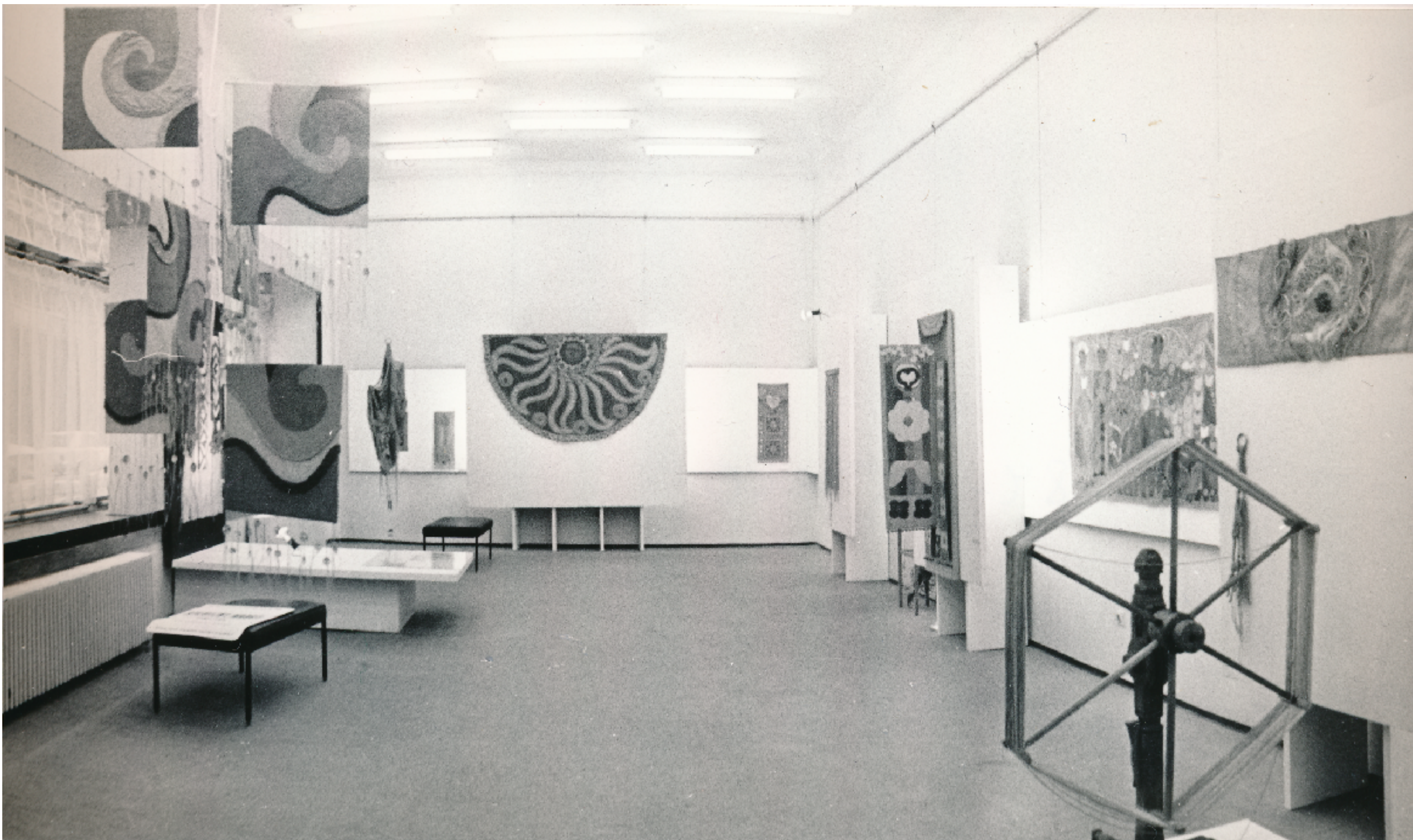
Margit Szilvitzky's (1931-2018) name has become inseparable from the breakthrough of Hungarian fibre art and its heyday in the seventies. Artists working in this area regarded textile as a primary, autonomous medium, and – in parallel to its emancipation from the applied arts – they addressed contemporary issues and questions arising in international art discourse.

As of the 1970s, operating outside the traditional categories of high art and on the periphery of political attention involving mostly female artists, a network of biennales in Hungary offered an institutional framework for experimental approaches to textile/fibre art of which Szilvitzky was an almost constant participant or organiser. Szilvitzky's oeuvre makes for the profile of a versatile artist who also produced a significant body of theoretical work. Her oeuvre seems to follow the evolution of progressive tendencies in the second half of the twentieth century, from abstraction to minimal and conceptual tendencies, and eventually to painting in the eighties.

She worked as a fashion designer – also an expert in the history of clothing and traditional costumes – before she began to experiment with fabric. She was a regular participant in international exhibitions of Hungarian fabric/fibre art, also taking part in several graphic and artists' book shows. She held solo appearances in Helsinki, Rome, Voorburg, at Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle Budapest, among other venues. While obtaining a prominent role as a regular exhibitor also internationally and a shaper of key events in the field of fibre art, she achieved a significant position as a professor at the University of Applied Arts, organizing a Bauhaus-inspired “preliminary course” composed of studies of form and structure. She was a recipient of the titles of Artist of Merit and Artist of Excellence, as well as the Order of Merit of the Hungarian Republic.



Unfolding, 1969, burlap, hemp rope-collage, sisal and mixed media, 45 × 127 cm



Installation view, Szilvitzky's solo exhibition, Institute for Cultural Relations, Budapest, 1970

Szilvitzky's early works bear undeniable kinship to assemblage. These aspects reflected an intention of a unified spatial arrangement at her 1970 solo exhibition at the Institute for Cultural Relations in Budapest. Natural fabrics, arranged into a single image plane along with various other materials (lace, velvet, beads, etc.), dominated these works, with the pervasive use of organic/natural motifs in different stages of reduction. The nature of these works is essentially a product of an 'abstracting' outlook derived from analysing the symbol systems – rooted in the examination of nature elements – of traditional clothing and folk object culture, on the one hand, and of the concurrent exploration of Hungarian turn-of-the-century art/art nouveau with its roots in folk art, on the other, simultaneously accompanied by increasingly 'rustic' and reduced works.

Embroidery played a part in the initial period of Szilvitzky's engagement of 'soft' and 'amorphous' forms, accompanied by 'organic', biological shapes. On closer inspection, they seem to approximate the characteristic visual language of essentialist women's art (*Unfolding*, 1969), a phenomenon appearing in the Western scene, when Szilvitzky and her generation began their careers. This wave of 'women's art' articulated its identity by reaffirming biological sex and validating the female bodily experience. The artist herself linked these works to nature. As she writes, 'the forerunners of my motifs include the halved pomegranate, watermelon and even pumpkin.'

A noteworthy characteristic of Szilvitzky's work is ready-made but always natural fabric created by mass production, a tendency that led her to her trademark material, basic white canvas/linen in the mid-seventies. Even when she started experimenting with fabric as an autonomous material, she used waste from the fashion studio she was working in at the time, using natural, but ready-made linen, hemp, burlap and jute that she dyed by hand with natural materials.



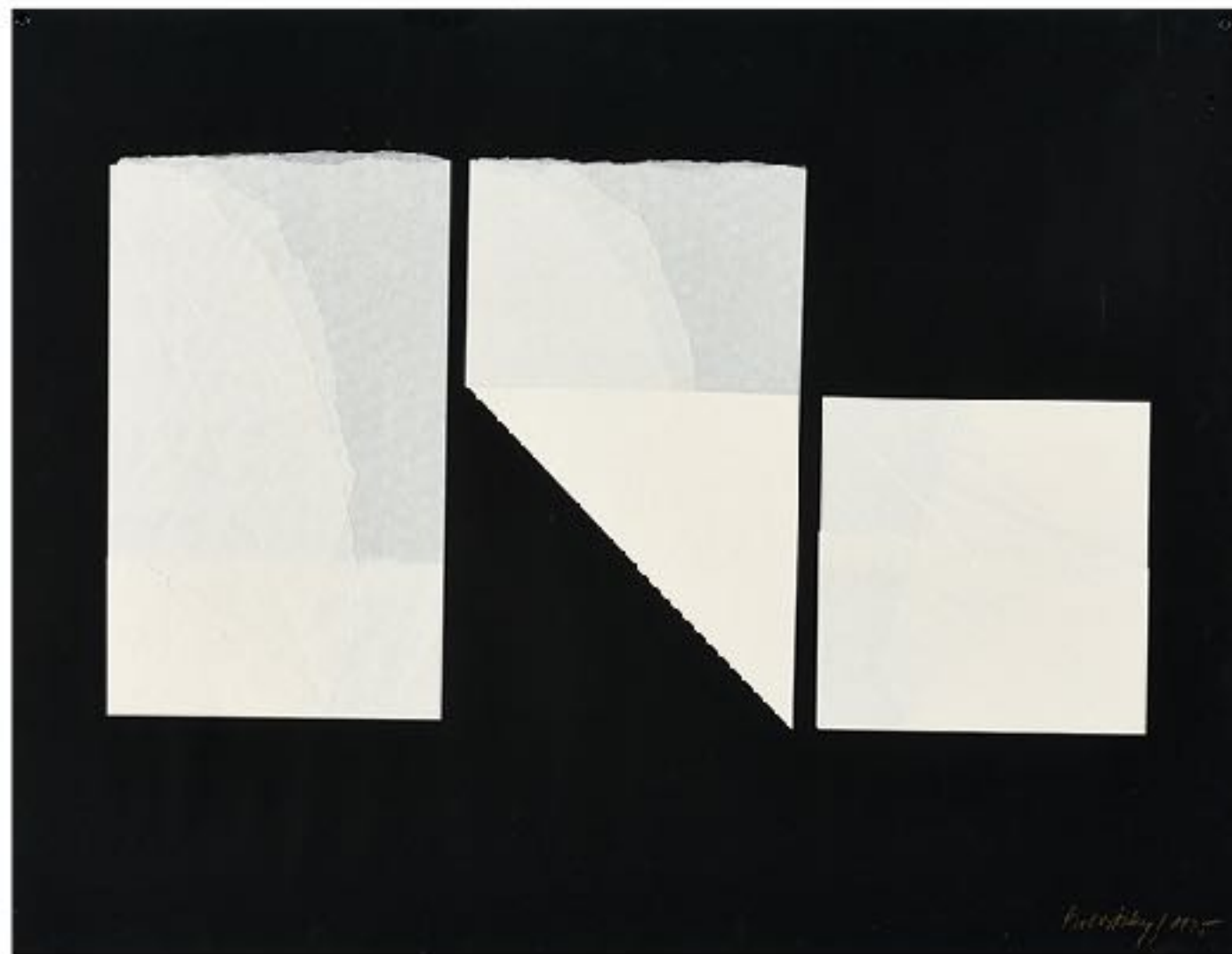
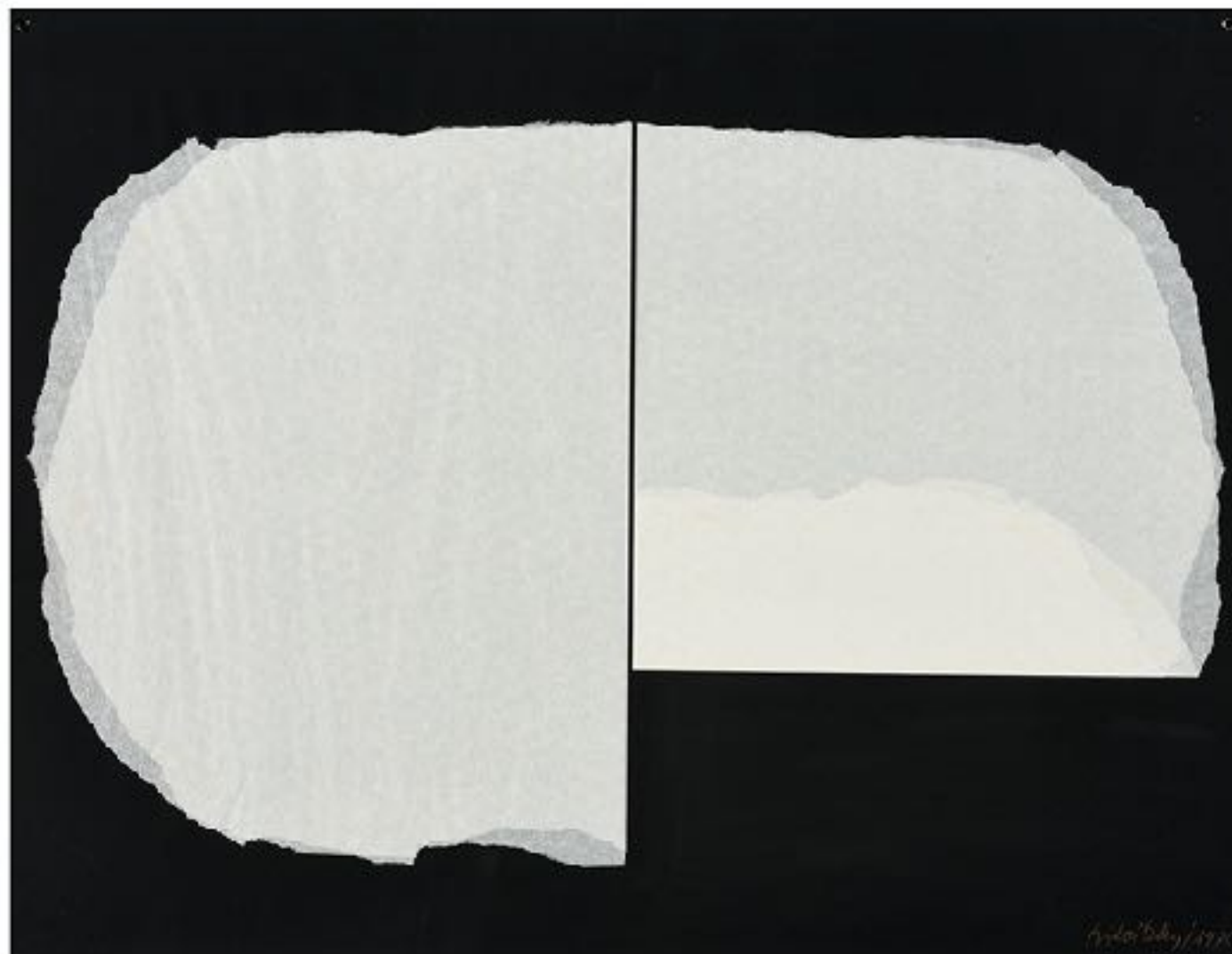
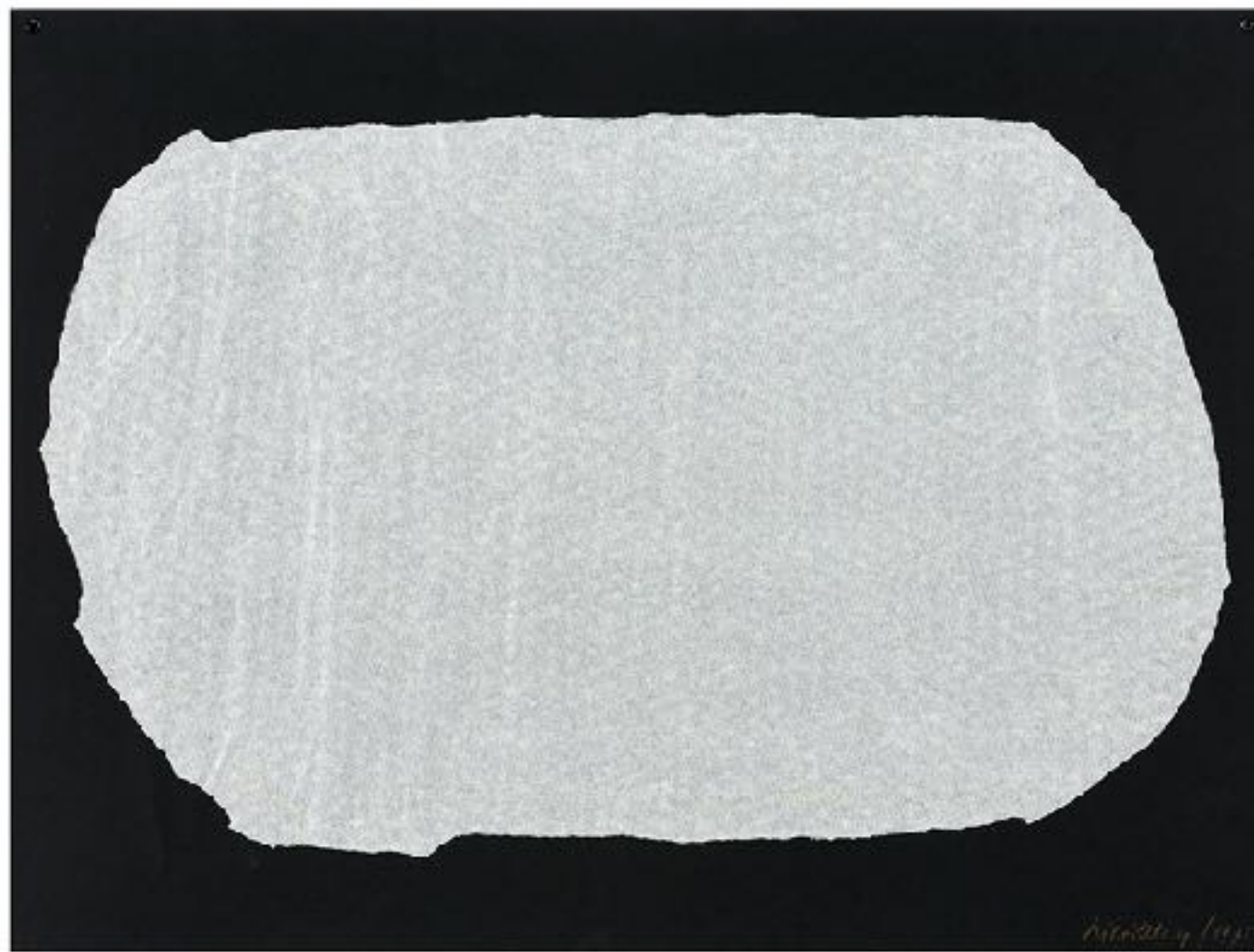
During the early period, when Szilvitzky experimented with the autonomous possibilities of fabric, her work was also influenced by her previous activity as a fashion designer as well as her studies in the history of clothing on which she published several books throughout her career. Just like in the case of the rare and unique piece from this time, *Dalmatic*, she employed the tools of direct references – or ‘quotes’ from the history of material culture – and appropriation, which connected areas of history, folk art and history of culture, as well as the cultic-liturgical object culture. The piece carries resemblance to liturgical clothing. The Sun-disc, simplified to an elementary sign, is a central motif among the fundamentally geometric ornaments.

Dalmatic, 1970, appliqué, sewn, embroidered linen, 150 × 115 cm



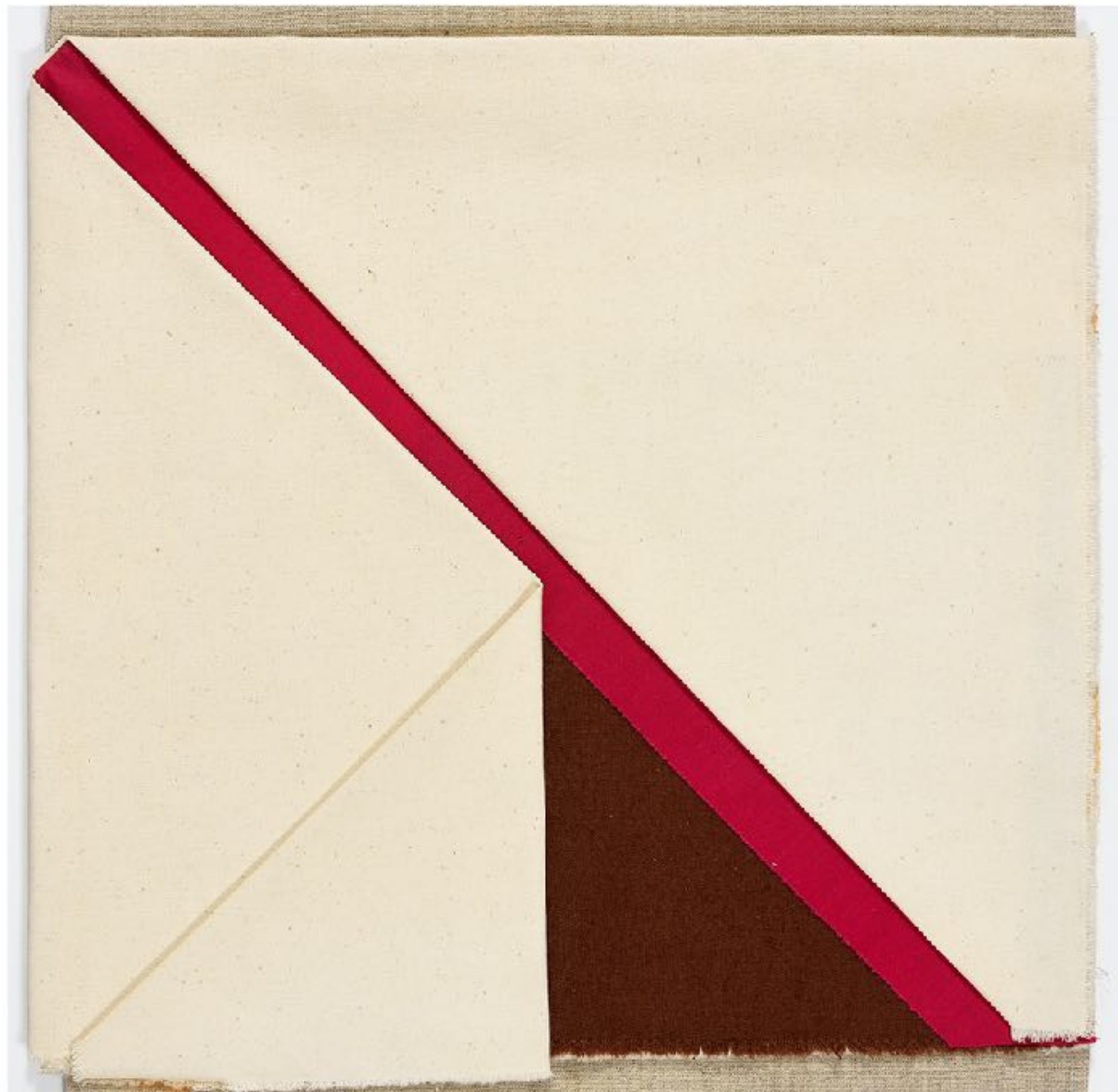
Flags 1-6, 1970, sewn collage on canvas, 59 × 110 cm each

The six-part *Flag*, figuring among the exhibited works at the show, is rich in symbolic and historical references. The piece shows the impact of folk art as well as art nouveau, both rooted in the application of elements taken from nature. The large-scale textile work was shown at the first time as a central element in a ritual-like scene, arranged by Szilvitzky in her solo exhibition in 1972. The multi-part environmental work was based on the close interaction of the objects with the joint use of human-like figures covered in embroidered and appliqué fabric and other textile works evoking both historical costumes and cultic-liturgical objects.



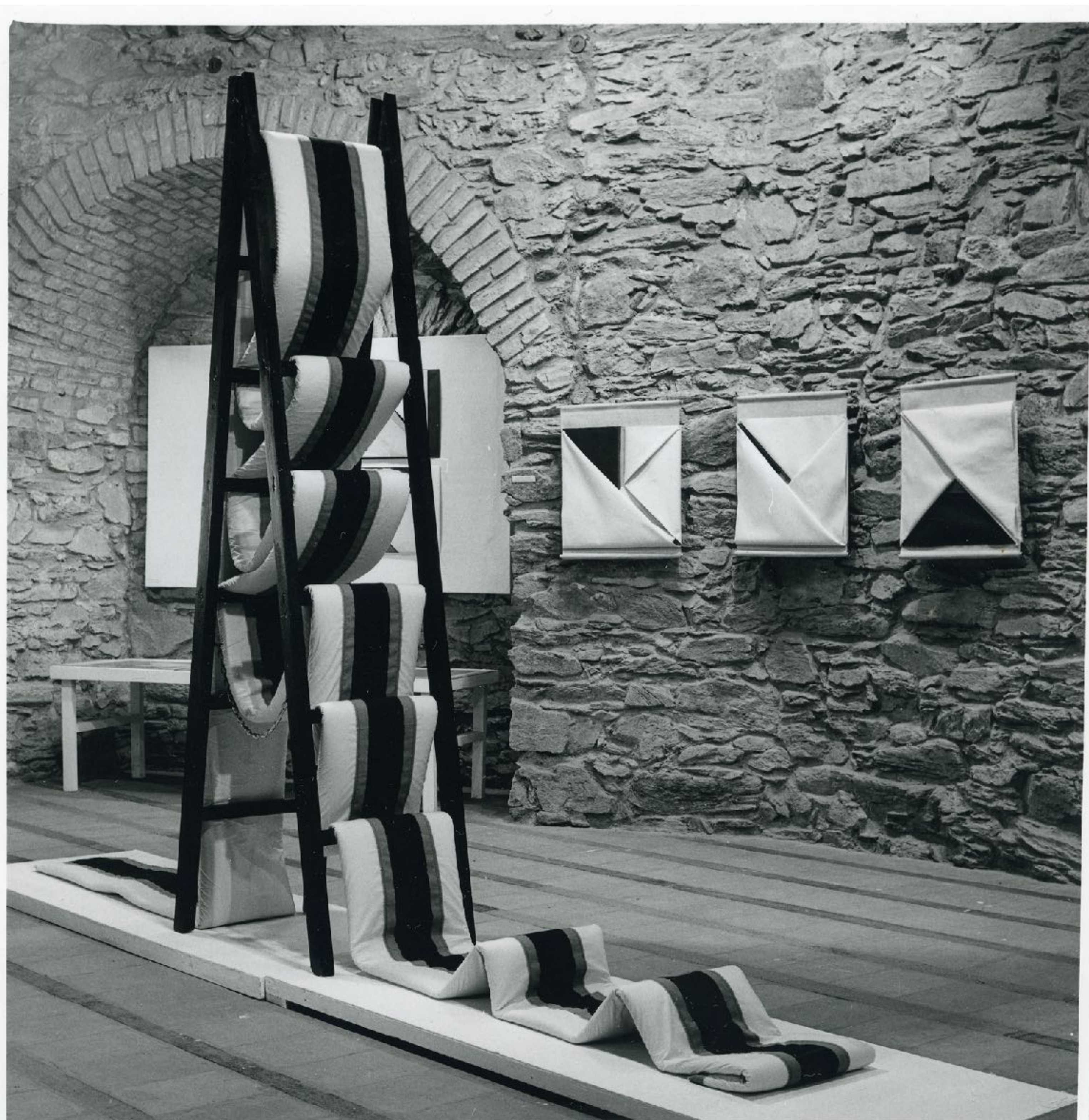
Finding the Square I-III, 1975,
torn and folded tracing paper, paper,
49 × 64 cm each

The artist turned to white canvases in the second half of the seventies. It was also during this time that she turned her attention to the square as Malevichian 'pure form' (in addition to other basic geometric shapes). This new direction was aptly demonstrated by her emblematic process work, entitled *Finding the Square* (1975). The square – reflecting on the traditions of suprematism, De Stijl and concretism – along with the emblematic grid pattern of modernism were dominant forms in Szilvitzky's solo exhibition in 1976, which signified an important milestone in her journey toward expanding the experimental and fine art-related conceptualisation of textile. It was at this show, that *100x100 Squares* – which carried the unique properties of both reliefs and panel paintings – and the work entitled *Evidence*, exhibited in the current show, were first presented. The artist's serial works and process art pieces, which represented a shift toward minimal and conceptual art, drew her systematising and system-seeking attention not only to the examination of the sculptural potential of textiles and the possibilities of turning the two-dimensional plane into three-dimensional space, but also to the exploration of light and shadow in relation to one another.



100 x 100 Square 1-3, 1976, sewn and folded application on linen, 51 × 50 cm each

”One of the simplest ways to shape textile is to fold it. This action will have a definite formal consequence – it will leave traces or edges – and, as such, provides elemental insight into the interior, exterior and spatial aspects of spatial form development. It was while folding canvas that I discovered those geometric formations, those relationships between congruence, symmetry and repetition, which often show kinship to the laws of natural formation.” – Margit Szilvitzky, 1979



Installation view, Szilvitky's solo show, Zwinger, Kőszeg, 1976



Evidence No.2, 1976, folded, ironed linen, 67 × 72 cm

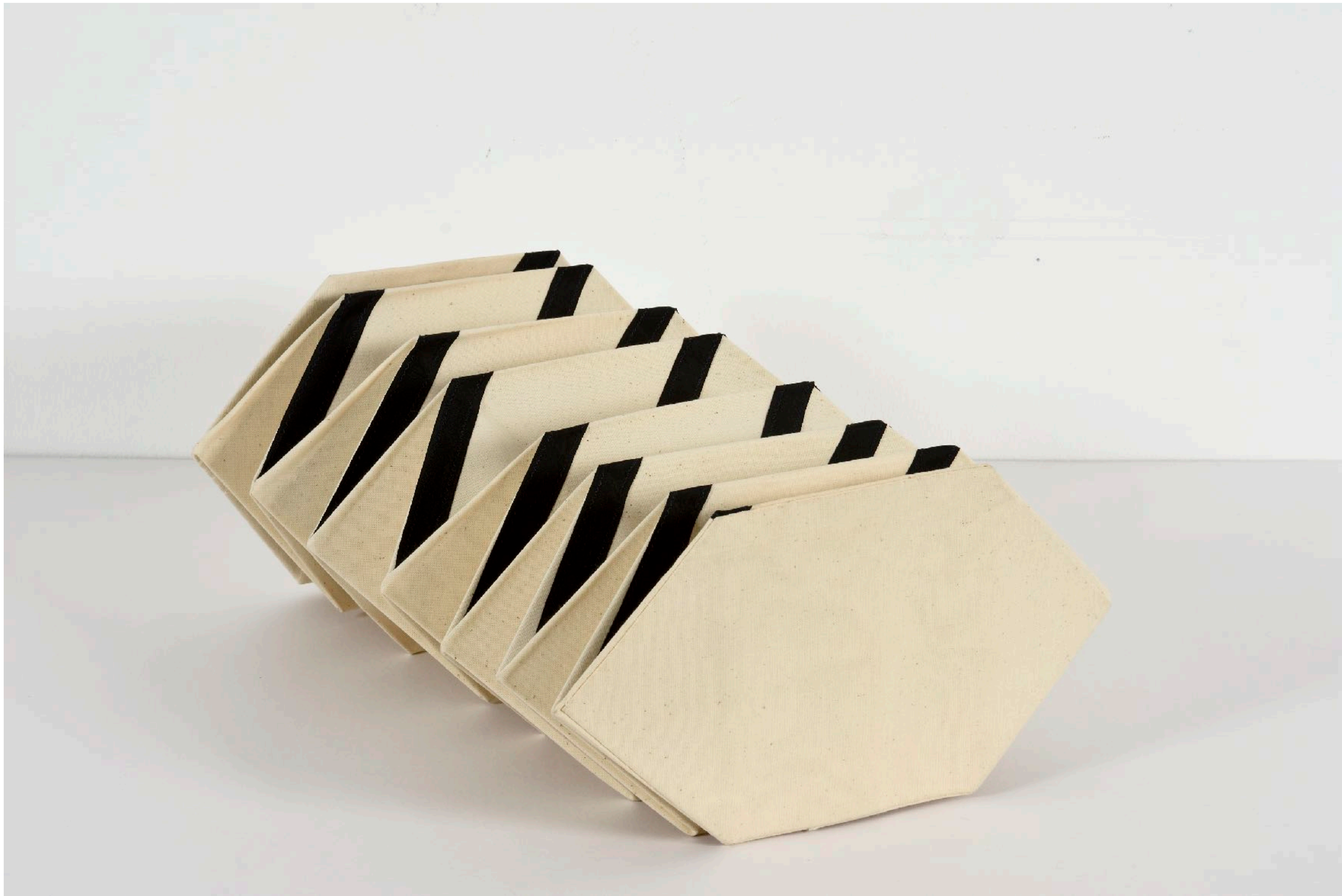


Installation view, Amos Anderson Museum, Helsinki, 1977

Szilvitzky's exhibition held in Helsinki in 1977, represented a further cornerstone in terms of her turn toward the material (the white canvas) and the concept (the mode of thinking grounded in a system of connected forms). Her *Floor Objects*, built on the 'harmonica motif', can be viewed either as series of modules multiplying hexagonal formations bounded by ironed edges, or as elements of shaping space in the spirit of Moholy-Nagy. Finding her systematic method for creating variations through folding, along with the constant analysis of – and experimentation with – materials, was closely linked with the work conducted within the framework of *Art Studies*, a course taught by Szilvitzky at the Academy of Applied Arts, which was based on Bauhaus practice and had the development of students' visual thinking as its objective. The methods and material-based experiments that she applied in her course – in addition to their connection to the practice of such artists as Anni Albers – were in large part inspired by the paper studies of Josef Albers (former leader of the Bauhaus Vorkurs and professor at Black Mountain College, the American centre of experimental art). This connection's influence could be felt in the maximal economy of folded forms with respect to the material, along with the equality of visual elements, the artist's recognition of the form-creating potential of absence, and her openness to the unexpected.



Floor Object 3, 1977, folded and sewn linen, 18 × 32 × 45 cm



Floor Object 1, 1977, folded and sewn linen, 18 × 32 × 45 cm



Installation view, Margit Szilvitzky: *Finding the Square*, 2021, acb Attachment, Budapest

The textile object *Modulation*, consisting of interlacing folded and ironed elements, was first exhibited in the show organised at Amos Anderson Museum, Helsinki in 1977. This piece was followed by a series of works, first of all *Modulation II*. The harmonica motif, which – in conceptualising the work as an object of both meaning and function – brings to mind origami lanterns and early optical devices to mind, was also a defining element of *Floor Objects* (1977). While *Modulation II* is more of a floor piece, Szilvitzky always stressed that there are no predetermined formulas regarding the installation methods of her works from this time period: ‘For me, variability and adaptation to specific situations provide a perspective of a working process and require a constant state of creative readiness.’

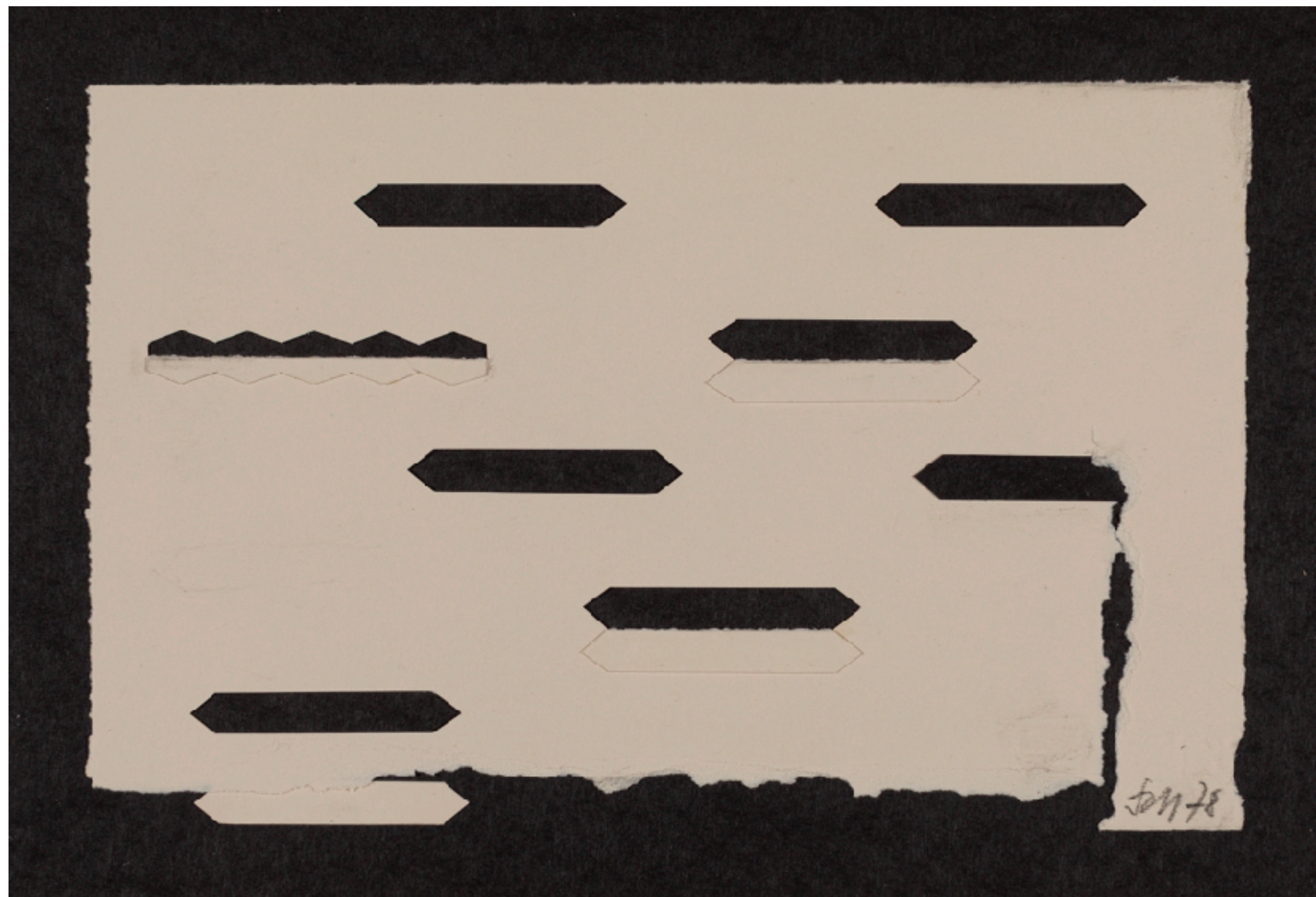


Modulation II, 1977, folded linen, 38 x 38 x 280 cm, Tate Collection



Wrinkled Sphere III, 1976, linen, 20 × 20 cm

Szilvitzky often presented her works at biennals and exhibitions dedicated to miniature textile with the maximum size as 20 × 20 × 20 cm. This genre "could be likened to packet-mail art. Postal object; manifested thought-message. It is simple to send, its message is mostly brief and concise" – as fellow artist Zsuzsa Szenes put it in 1984. Szilvitzky's minitextiles show a kinship with her larger, even spatial textile pieces as well. In the *Wrinkled Sphere*, she experimented with folding in the case of a shape other than rectangular.

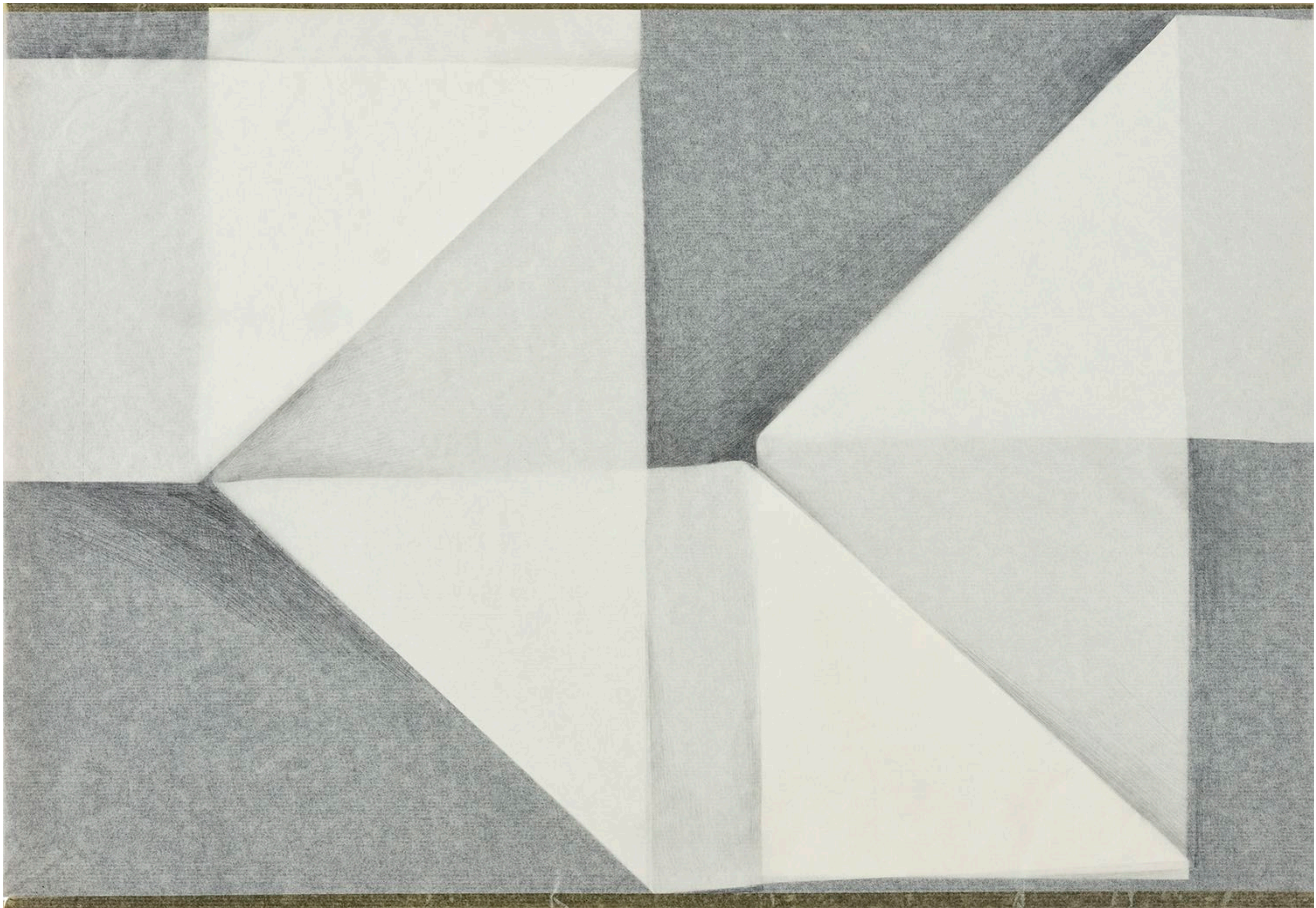


The exploration and utilisation of edges and angles, their use as lines, the juxtaposed gestures of crumpling, tearing and slashing, as well as the transparency and layering brought into play by folding, were all initially realised through Szilvitzky's experiments with paper. She then applied her paper-based observations to the even more shapeable material of textile, as well as to collages, drawings, spatial installations.

Marginaliae No 4 and 6, 1978, paper collage, 20 × 28 cm each

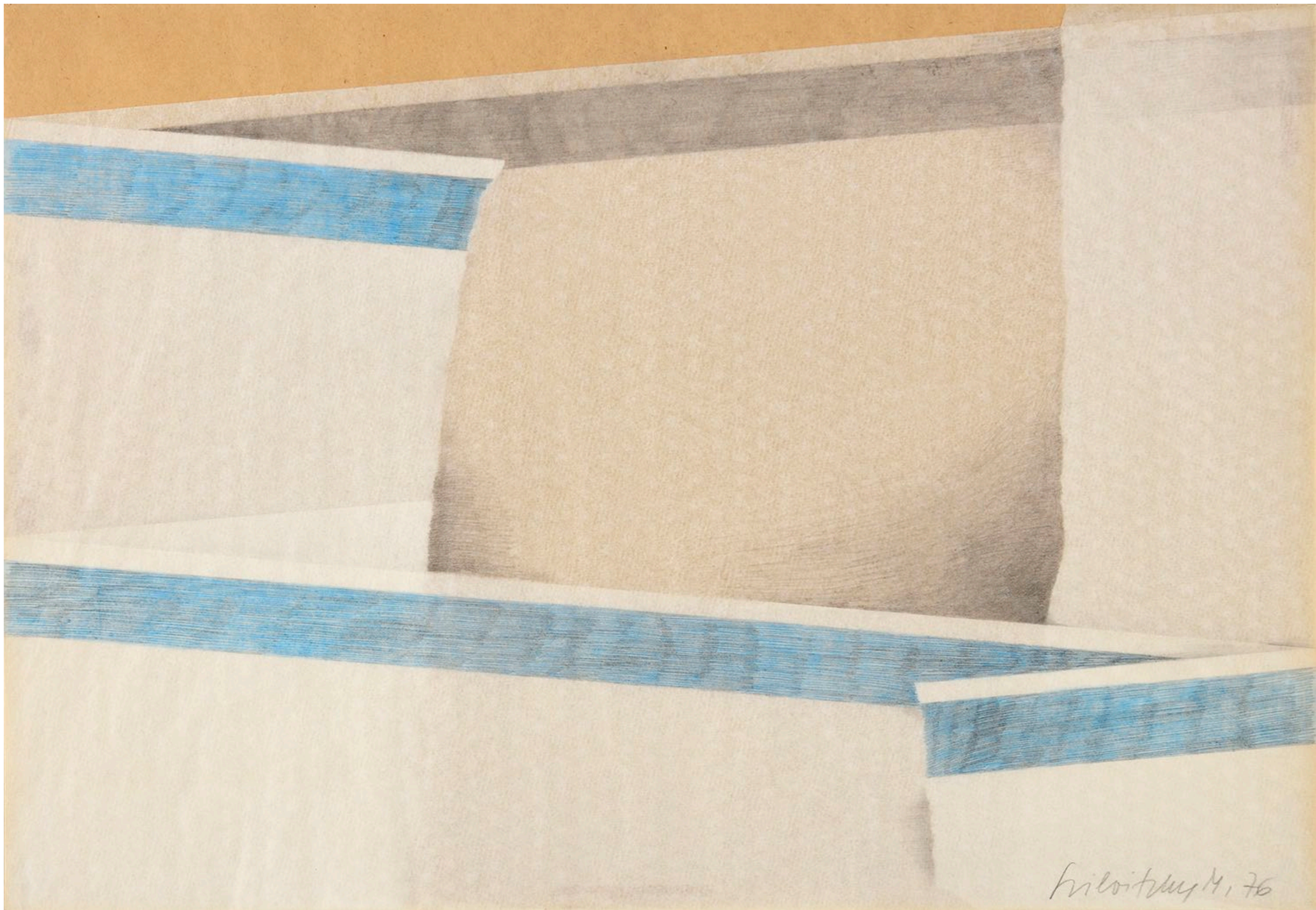


Paper folding, 1976, paper, tracing paper, 43.5 × 61 cm

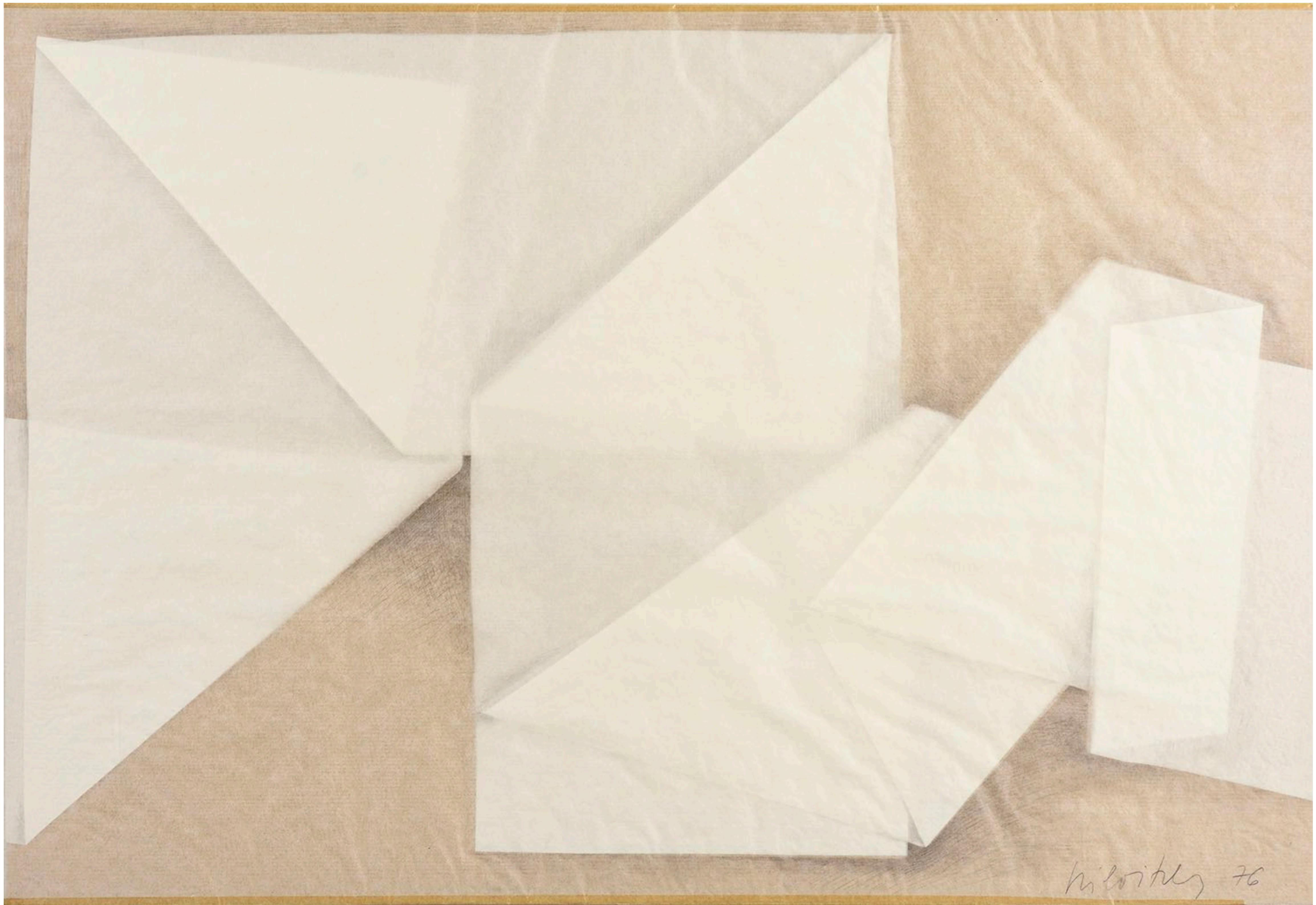


Paper folding, 1976, paper, tracing paper, 43 × 62 cm

Further works presented



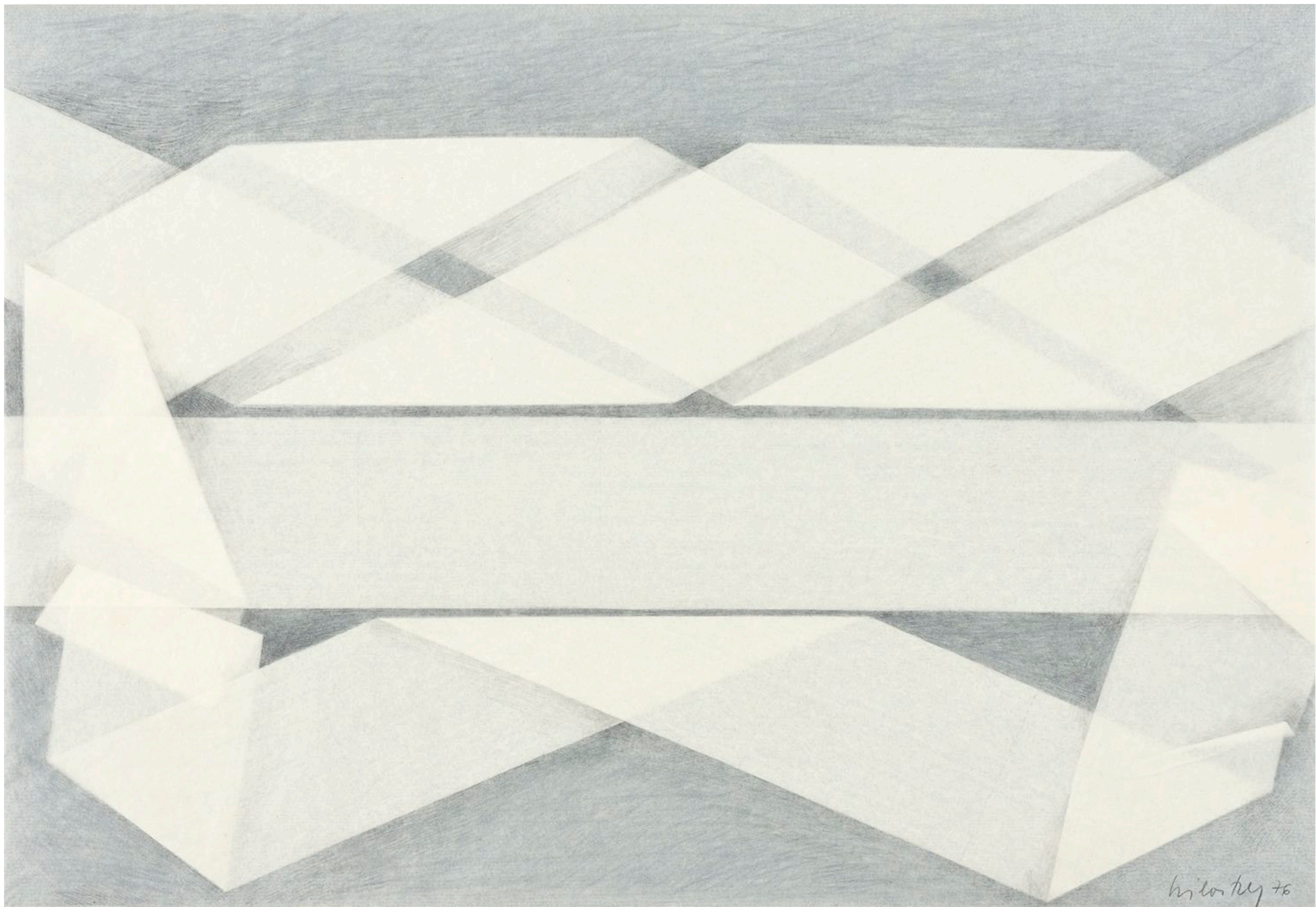
Paper folding, 1976, paper, tracing paper, color pencil, 44 × 62 cm



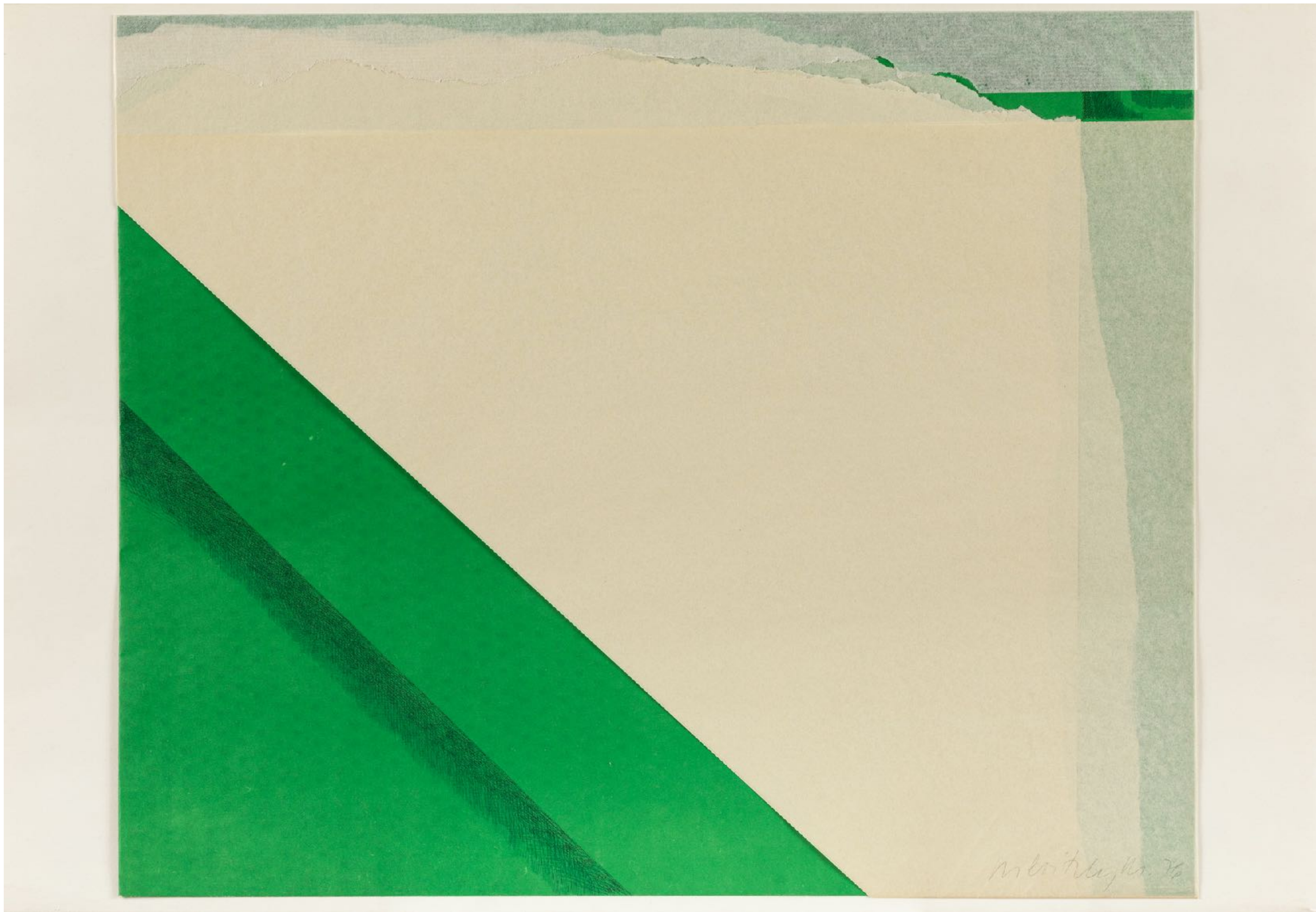
Paper folding, 1976, paper, tracing paper, 43.5 × 61 cm



Paper folding, 1976, paper, tracing paper, 43.5 × 61 cm



Paper folding, 1976, paper, tracing paper, 46 × 65 cm



Untitled, 1976, tracing paper, graphite pencil, paper, 42 × 50 cm

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