

Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman | 3

bloom

The RIBA Architecture Centre organised an event called *Fused* which looked at collaborations between architects and artists. The curators arranged for us to meet on a blind date because we share an interest in light. We had a coffee and looked at slides of each other's work. One common element was a fascination with the way in which natural and artificial light could be brought into play with each other. We talked about the possibility of using light to create space.

Each collaborating partnership was asked to locate a new work within the RIBA headquarters. The building has the closed, casket-like monumentality of a professional institute. We were offered a large room with high ceilings on the first floor. It has tall windows overlooking Portland Place. This room is usually used as a gallery with the blinds closed, the walls lined with drawings and the floor crowded with plinths for models. A wooden floor surrounded by a marble frame reinforces the grand, static quality of the space.

Figure 3.1 Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.

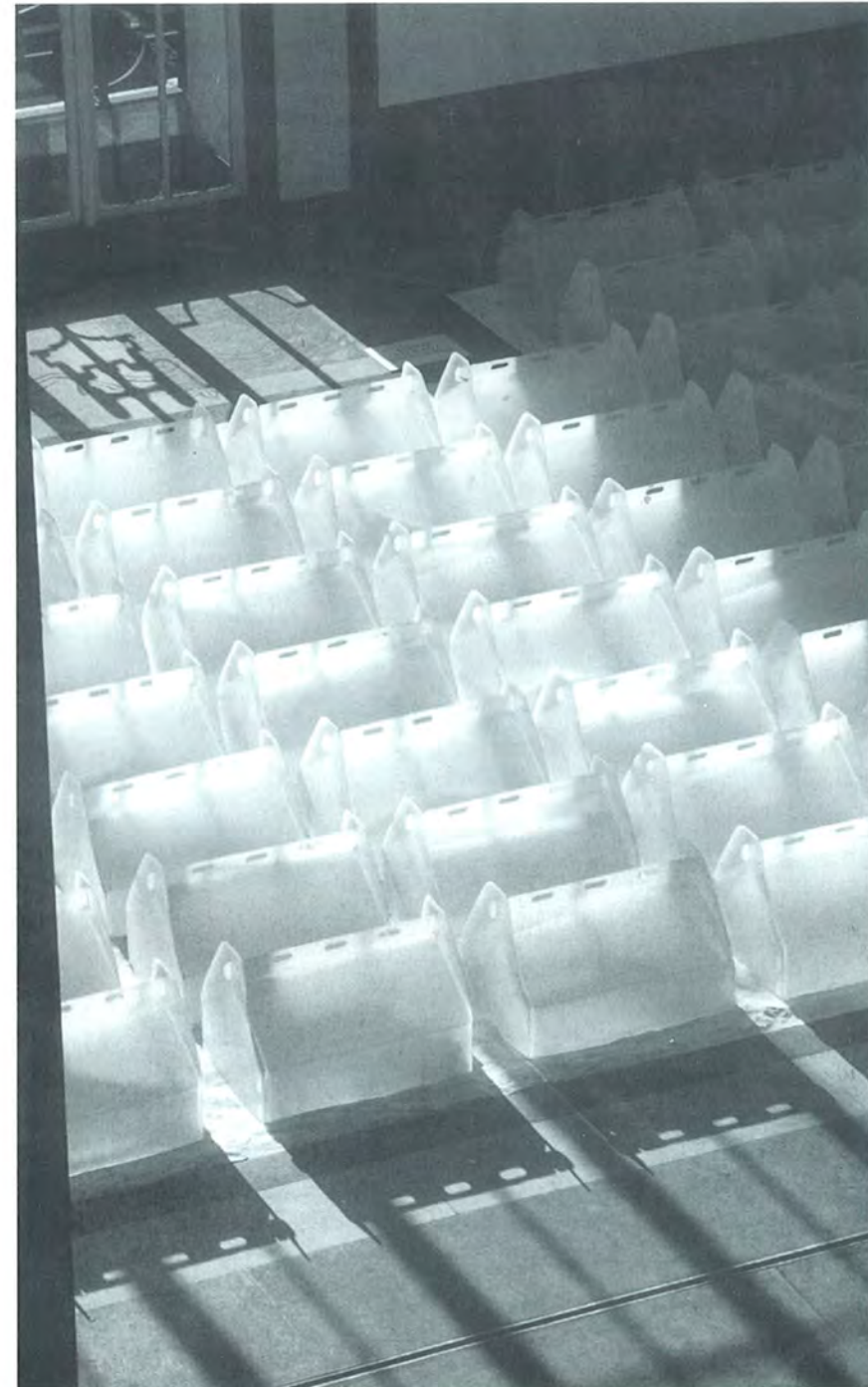
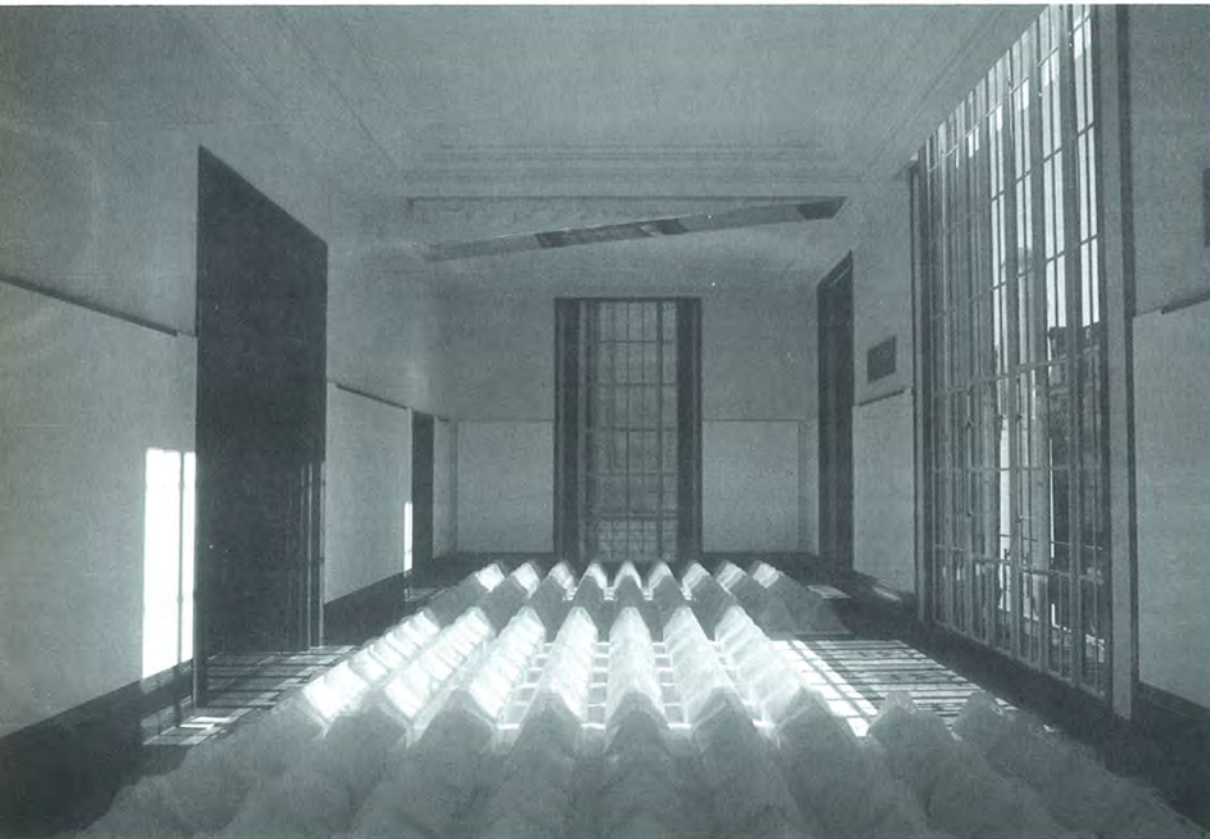
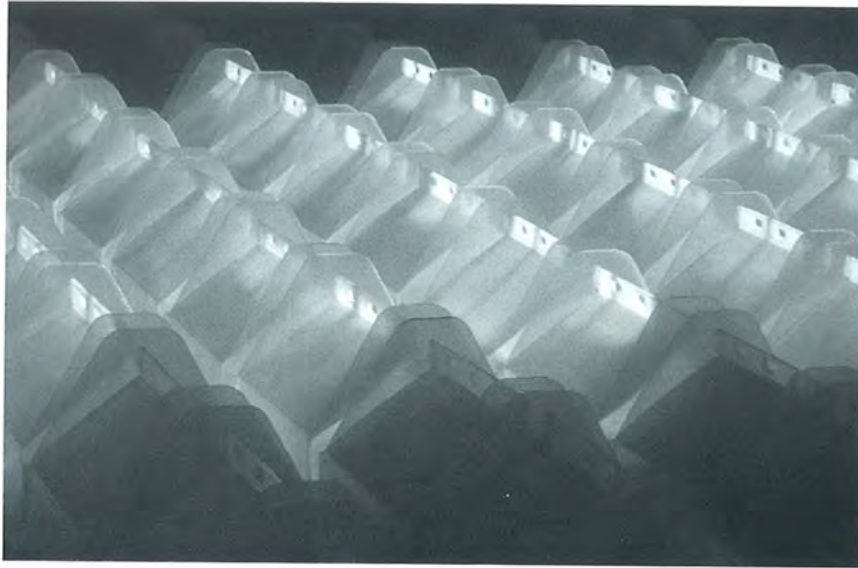


Figure 3.2 Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.

Figure 3.3 Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.



We experienced an early problem when we began to discuss the project. Both of us had a propensity to suggest fully-fledged ideas for interventions in the space. This stopped us from developing a single idea together. We decided to draw back from this by making separate lists of qualities that the space might have, but without making any proposals for how these would be achieved. The two lists displayed a remarkable consensus of ideas.

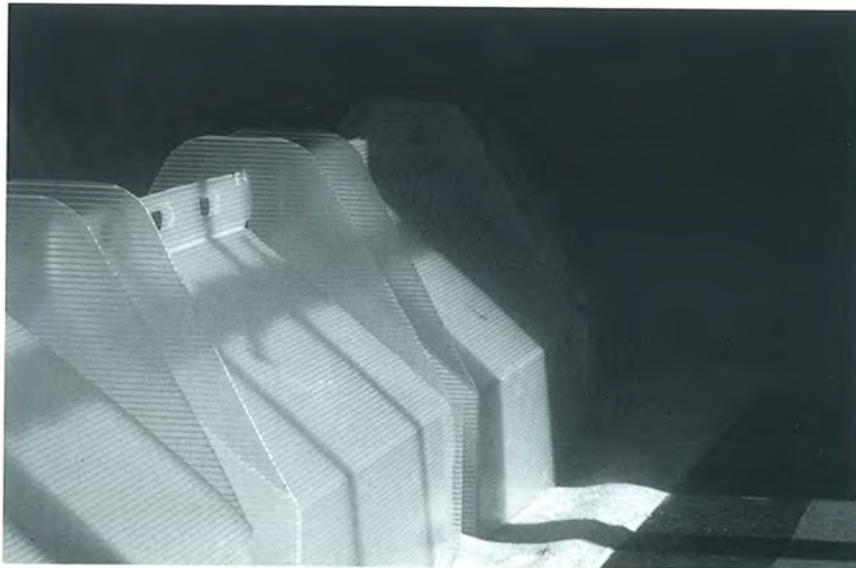


Figure 3.4 Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.

We emptied the room, pulled up the blinds and opened the windows. We found ourselves in a high, sunlit gallery open to the street. We talked about making a low field of light which would follow the form of the floor. This would have a relationship with the changing level of natural light outside. We wanted to make something within the room that would be manifest on the street.

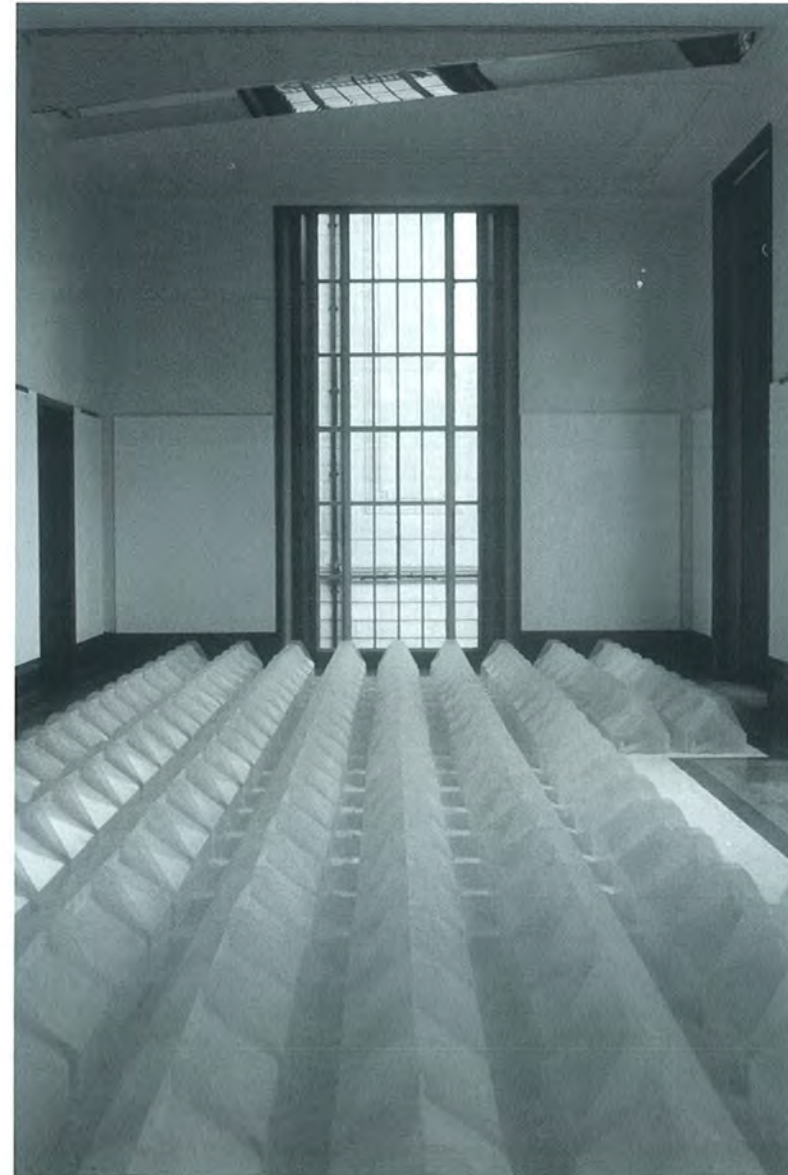


Figure 3.5 Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.

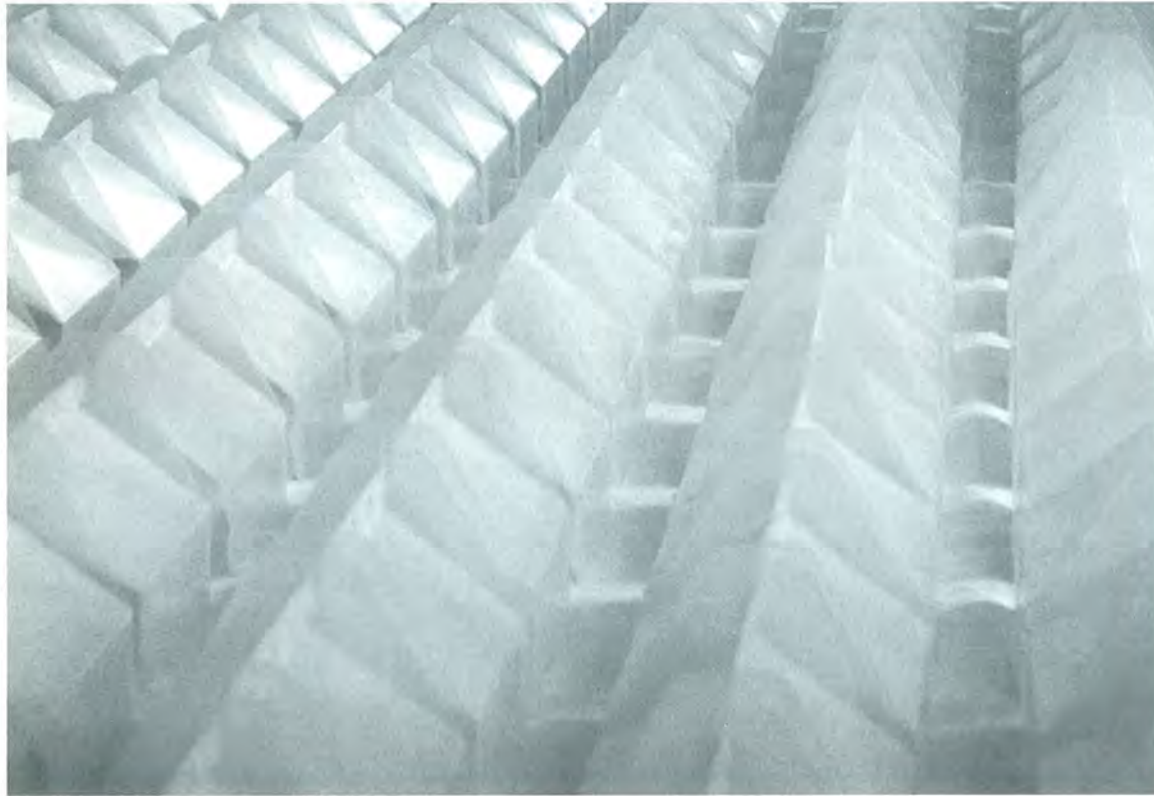
1 C. Woodward, *The Buildings of Europe: Rome, Manchester and New York*, Manchester University Press, 1995.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

This would not shout out from the façade but might be subtly revealed. We remembered a passage from Christopher Woodward's *The Buildings of Europe: Rome* in which he describes the Palazzo Farnese by Michelangelo.¹ The building is now the French Embassy and is closed to the public. Woodward suggests that visitors who want to see the fine ceilings should stand outside at dusk and watch the lights coming on.² We enjoyed the oblique nature of this experience. In our proposal, we imagined that angled mirrors on the ceiling of the space would reflect a field of light on the floor, making the installation visible to passers-by on the pavement below.

It was necessary for the piece to find a balance between abstraction and figuration. We needed a grain or a texture for the work. We searched for something that would have the qualities of both a field and a found object. We chanced upon a mail order catalogue for gardening accessories which had flat-pack 'cosy cloches' – small translucent polycarbonate structures for keeping frost off plants. When these simple forms were arrayed, complex geometries emerged.

Figure 3.6 Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.



We sent off for some cloches and began experimenting by lighting them internally, standing them in sunlight and creating groups. We tried out various light sources, gauging how they responded to daylight. Ultraviolet light provided an extraordinary range of conditions as the day changed. It was muted at midday and built up to a great violet haze at night. At dusk it shifted between mauve, pink and blue. In order to visually unify the cloches we arranged them in a grid format, setting them on to a bed of Daz detergent on the floor. The Daz fluoresced under the UV light, animating the space between the cloches.



Figure 3.7 Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.

Constructing the cloches and wiring the lamps took about a week. Many people came to help and we remember clusters of volunteers, like fishermen mending nets, sitting in a maze of cables and swathes of tinfoil on the floor. There was a picnic atmosphere in the room. In production line fashion, electrical tasks were divided into parties of screwers and strippers. There was a real concern throughout the week that the power circuits in the building could not support the number of lamps. We spent our time negotiating with safety men.



Figure 3.8 Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.

The Daz had to align perfectly with the edge of the marble surround and credit cards turned out to be the best way of achieving a neat line. Half way through the final day, we found out about the two kinds of Daz. Proctor & Gamble had decided to discontinue the old blue whitener in Daz and replace it with all white Daz. The bar codes and boxes for each kind were identical. All white Daz doesn't fluoresce, we could tell this because we had bought a hundred kilos of each type. With hours to go Niall, in his opening night suit, had to take a taxi to every Tesco Metro in central London and demand to inspect their Daz. Every box on every shelf was opened, paid for and removed only if it was the right type. Niall still fluoresces on opening nights.



Figure 3.9 Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.

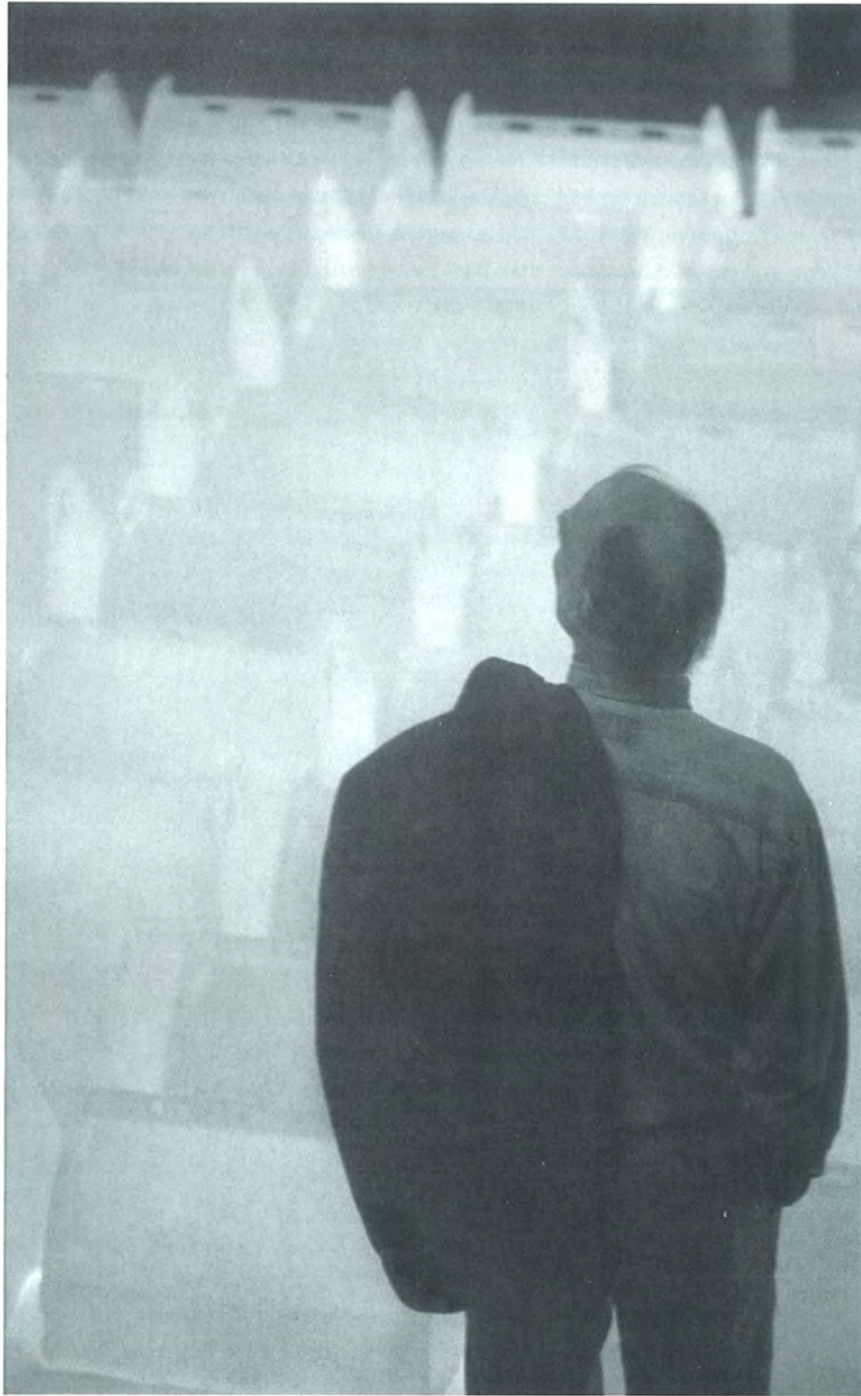


Figure 3.10 Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.

The sun moved over the cloches during the day, casting shadows of tall window mullions on to repeating white gables. In late afternoon, colours began to emerge from within the structures. At dusk there was a balance of internal and ambient light. Then the whole thing began to glow, flooding the street with violet light. *Bloom* was in place for a month and the perfume of detergent filled the building.



Figure 3.11 Niall McLaughlin and Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.

For us this was a sensory occupation of the space. It carried no explicit meaning. An elderly visitor to the opening demanded to know how it should be understood. He had a faintly glowing patch of Daz on the tip of his nose.



Figure 3.12 Niall McLaughlin and
Martin Richman, *Bloom*, 1997.