

# **Projects 74 : Ricci Albenda : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 16, 2001-January 22, 2002**

**[Laura Hoptman]**

Author

Albenda, Ricci

Date

2001

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

[www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/160](http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/160)

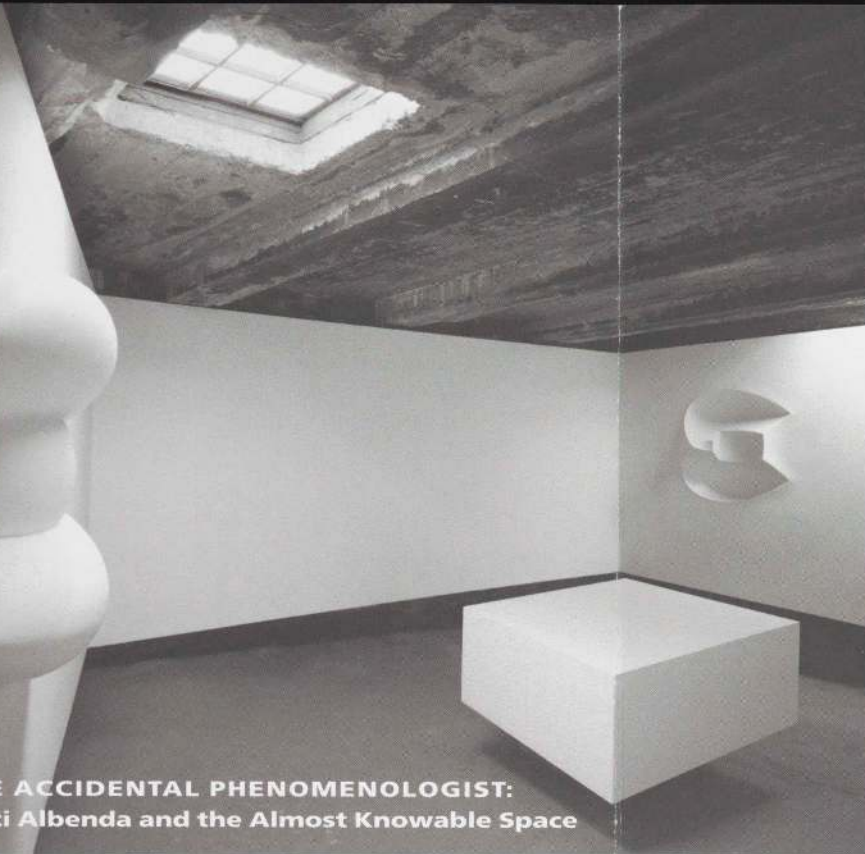
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projects 74 ricci albenda

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**THE ACCIDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGIST:  
Ricci Albenda and the Almost Knowable Space**

*If a work is successful, it has the strange power of self-teaching.*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, from "Cézanne's Doubt."

Go in, look around, explore. Ricci Albenda's environments are built for this. Let your eyes be fooled by his trompe l'oeil cubby holes and perspectively distorted floors, and when you have had enough of this pleasurable trickery, use your hands, your feet, or your entire body as you move through space to solve these visual riddles. Albenda believes that we experience everything through our bodies. He is fascinated by space and the physical experience of moving through it, and his room-size sculptures are designed precisely to allow us to share in that fascination. The writer William Gibson's evocative description of science fiction as "consensual hallucination" captures both the trippy disorientation of wandering through one of Albenda's works as well as the artist's utopian goal to create a zone of pure intersubjectivity—to enter into an Albenda creation is to enter into the artist's world, see how he sees, feel how he feels, thrill to what he has thrilled to.

In the past, Albenda has bisected galleries horizontally, bored tunnels into walls to create spaces that resemble the delicate interior of conch shells, and, in a few cases, built entire rooms according to series of skewed, but perfectly calculated, perspectival dimensions. He has created tetrahedral structures that he calls "annexes," which from some angles look like rooms and from others like elegant, geometric relief sculptures. For *Projects 74*, the artist has transformed a portion of the mezzanine level of the Museum into a series of spatial milieus, both real and illusory. Three thresholds lead, or seem to lead, to three corridors, each sculpted by rushing angles. The first is a trompe l'oeil mural, the effect of depth created by painted lights and darks and good old-fashioned linear perspective. Proceeding counterclockwise, the second work is an actual corridor, eighteen feet in length. A quick glance at its yawning entrance reveals the radically pitched ceiling and sloping floors depicted in the mural, but reversed,

*Action at a Distance* (P.S.1, "Greater New York").  
2000. Drywall, fiberglass, and paint, dimensions variable. Photo: Frank Oudeman, courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

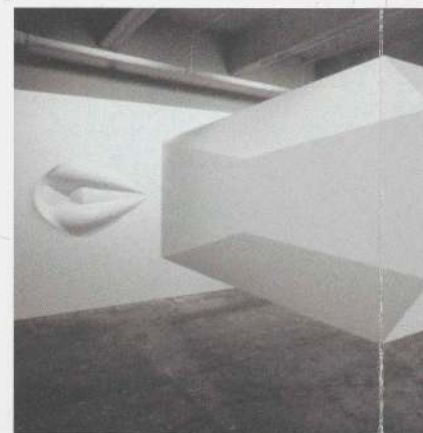
as if in a mirror, fulfilling the familiar wish not only to perceive a picture but to actually enter into it. The third space is an annex of sorts. It has the appearance of a room but is actually a wall-size relief sculpture. An interpretation in three-dimensional solids of both the trompe l'oeil mural and the actual corridor, the annex lies somewhere between a visual puzzle and an actual space, however shallow. These three elements create a continuum of spatial experience—from the purely perceptual to the actual. As such, they provide a primer on how a body—Albenda's body, and ours—apprehends its environment as it moves through it.

Albenda has said that there are only two ways to find out the nature of things: personal investigation and scientific experimentation. Neither is mutually exclusive; in fact, they are linked. In his search for a language to express the way things are—and because he is obsessed

with systems of descriptions, whether they be numbers, letters, or subatomic particles—Albenda has read widely in mathematics and popular physics, particularly chaos and string theory. He recognizes, though, that these methods can only take him part of the way, and he believes that physical, rather than theoretical, experimentation is the ultimate proof of a conjecture. "Someone without senses could never do physics. Every concept cannot exist purely as itself—it always has roots in experience," he said recently. This is reflected in his practice: however sophisticated his computer-modeling programs, Albenda always makes scale models of his constructions. "I can't finish it," he has declared, "if I can't walk through it."

This notion that human experience is the authoritative source of human knowledge does not come from contemporary scientific theory. Rather, its roots are in postwar philosophy, specifically in phenomenology, a school of thought that emerged from Europe in the decade after World War II. Championed by a broad range of thinkers including Edmund Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre, the phenomenological perspective was applied to the study of the visual arts by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961). In a number of influential books published beginning in the late 1940s, Merleau-Ponty argued that lived experience is crucial to our understanding of the world; in order to gain access to things as they actually appear, and not as they are supposed to appear according to science or convention, one must experience them through perception (our sense of time, color, and space). Phenomenology's peculiarly modern emphasis on the subjective properties of the senses contradicted the more traditional "scientific" philosophies that based themselves on calculable, objective properties of point, plane, and ratio.

*Tesseract*. 2001. Drywall, fiberglass, and paint, dimensions variable. Photo: Frank Oudeman, courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York





Given Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on modernity, it comes as no surprise that he should have chosen Paul Cézanne, an inventor of modern painting, as the artist whose work most embodied the phenomenological point of view. According to the philosopher, Cézanne painted his landscapes with "lived perspective"—that is, he created three-dimensional space on two-dimensional canvases not through the trick of planar perspective but as it might be bodily experienced by the viewer. "Our body," Merleau-Ponty claimed, "is not primarily in space: it is of it"—and Cézanne's densely colored cubes of paint, laid on like complex, multihued brickwork, can make us feel as if we were in the painting rather than looking at it. Cézanne's painstaking descriptions of the actual way we perceive a landscape—his desire to depict, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "matter as it takes on form"—finds a contemporary analogy in Albenda's constructions. Standing in an Albenda environment is not dissimilar from what one imagines it would be like inside one of Cézanne's faceted hillsides. These spaces are always slightly but crucially warped to match how we would perceive them in reality. The perspectives created by Albenda's angles and his light and dark shading are never geometrically perfect, because, like Cézanne, he knows that this is not how we really see.

An important element of Cézanne's modernity lies in the fact that he eschewed artistic convention in favor of perceptual experience. The result is not that his pictures look more like landscapes, but that they look more like paintings. Thus, it might be argued that Albenda's cutting and shaping of the white walls of The Museum of Modern Art reveal those walls so loaded with meaning (historical, ideological, pecuniary) as nothing more nor less than what they are—solid planes that enclose space. It is perhaps fitting, then, that Albenda's project will be the final one in an area of the Museum that, after the exhibition's conclusion, will be gutted for renovation.

Merleau-Ponty's writings had a strong influence on the work of numerous artists during the 1960s, American Minimalists in particular, but they had fallen into relative obscurity until recently, when contemporary environmental artists like Olafur Eliasson (the subject of *Projects 73*, currently on view in the Garden Hall of the Museum) took a renewed interest in the philosopher's work. However, despite the pertinence of phenomenology to his own work, Albenda claims not to have read Merleau-Ponty. Rather, he came to his ideas about space through the experience of architecture, to which he was exposed in undergraduate classes at the Rhode Island School of Design and through his own reading and observation.

Less about being in a space than about creating space in the contemporary continuum between sculpture and architecture, Albenda's work approaches the latter. To describe how his pieces merge with or take over their sites—as opposed to merely sitting in them, as do site-specific sculptures—the artist has coined the phrase "site co-optive." Slightly menacing, it alludes to a structure that subtly or blatantly changes our experience of our surroundings.

The physiological destabilization brought about by the near absence of right angles in an Albenda environment is compounded by a disquiet that is more subtle, but no less connected to the individual's experience. This uneasiness comes from the recognition that Albenda's whorled structural punctures and cavernous corridors co-opt not only their spaces but their viewers as well. Like three-dimensional illustrations of what the Surrealists called "intrauterine

architecture," these works resemble, more than anything else, bodily orifices—from ear to anus—the cave openings to our most secret selves. Standing inside what we could imagine might be our own bodies creates confusion on an entirely different level than the merely optical: caught in an elision of inside and outside, we might not be able to discern where the work ends and where we begin.

The term for this type of disturbance in the relationship between self and space is "psychasthenia," and if it is not precisely fear that we feel when we enter Albenda's work, we do experience a kind of sensory estrangement. In the end, though, Albenda's goal is not to confuse, confound, trick, or amuse us, but to defamiliarize us, to separate what we know (see, feel, etc.) from what we can never hope to figure out.



*Single.* 1996. Drywall and acrylic, dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

Standing in the sweet spot of an Albenda environment, where all the angles converge into rushing quasi-perspectives, where the floor ramps up and down again and the ceiling tilts, we are poised—balanced, perhaps, on the very brink of the sensually perceivable—teetering over the precipice of the unknown.

Laura Hoptman, Department of Drawings

### biography

Born in Brooklyn where he presently resides, Ricci Albenda has participated in exhibitions in museums and galleries in the U.S. and abroad. Within the last few years his work has been featured in solo exhibitions at the Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York (2001, 1998) and at Van Laere Contemporary Art in Antwerp, Belgium (2000, 1999), as well as in group exhibitions at the Barbican Art Gallery in London and the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.) in Ghent, Belgium (both 2001), and at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York (both 2000), among many others.

### acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgments are due to Andrew Kreps of the Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Tom Lendvai; Maud Cassaignau, Lawrence Bowne, and Andrew Rejniak of B&R Projects; at MoMA, Laurence Kardish, Senior Curator, Film and Media, who organizes the *Projects* series; Ed Pusz, Department of Graphic Design, who designed the brochure in consultation with the artist; Jerome Neuner and David Hollely, Department of Exhibition Design and Production; and Attilio Perrino, Giuseppe Maraia, George Sivulka, Allan Smith, and Tim McManus, of the Museum's carpentry shop. Steve and Joe deserve a special *mille grazie* for the skill with which they found such an elegant way to construct two of the three elements of the installation.

Three-dimensional cover: Ricci Albenda

The projects series is sponsored by Peter Norton.

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and paint, dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy

