

# **Projects 5 : Magdalena Jetelová : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 14-April 28, 1987**

Author

Jetelová, Magdalena, 1946-

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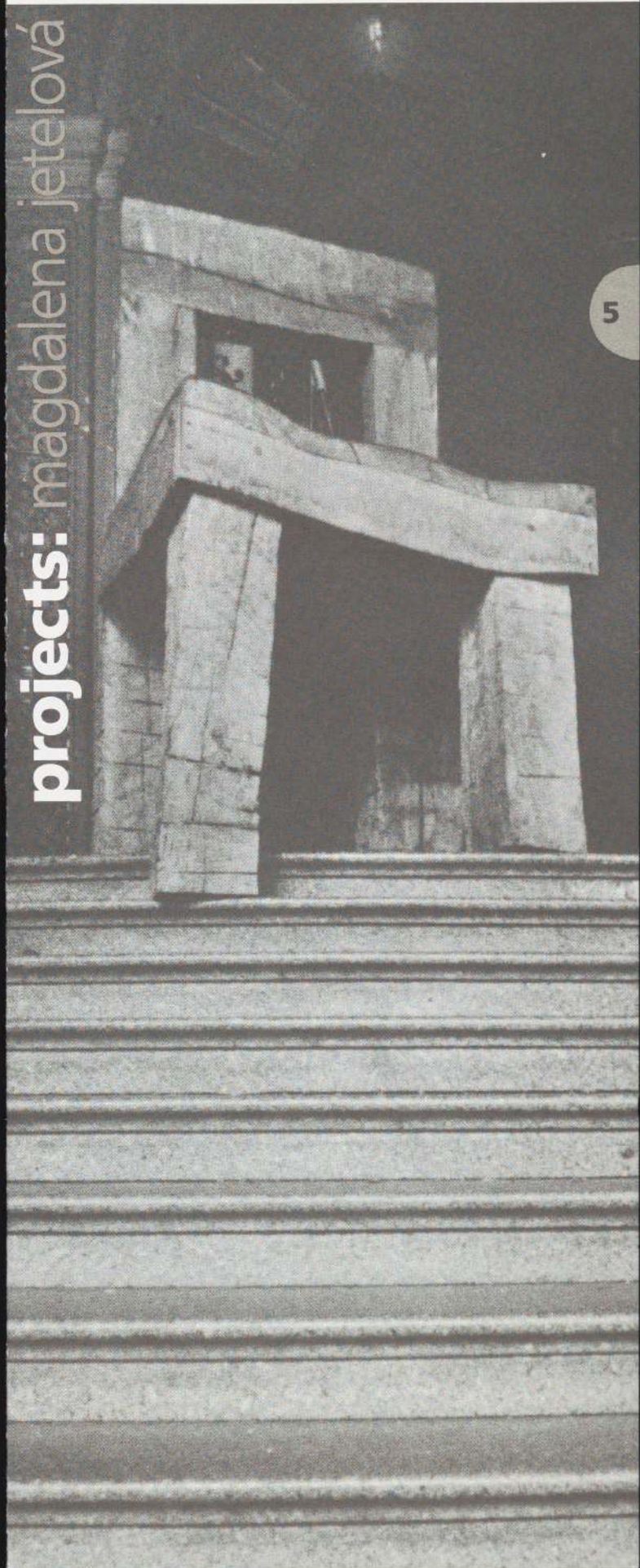
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index of participating artists.

The Museum of Modern Art  
New York  
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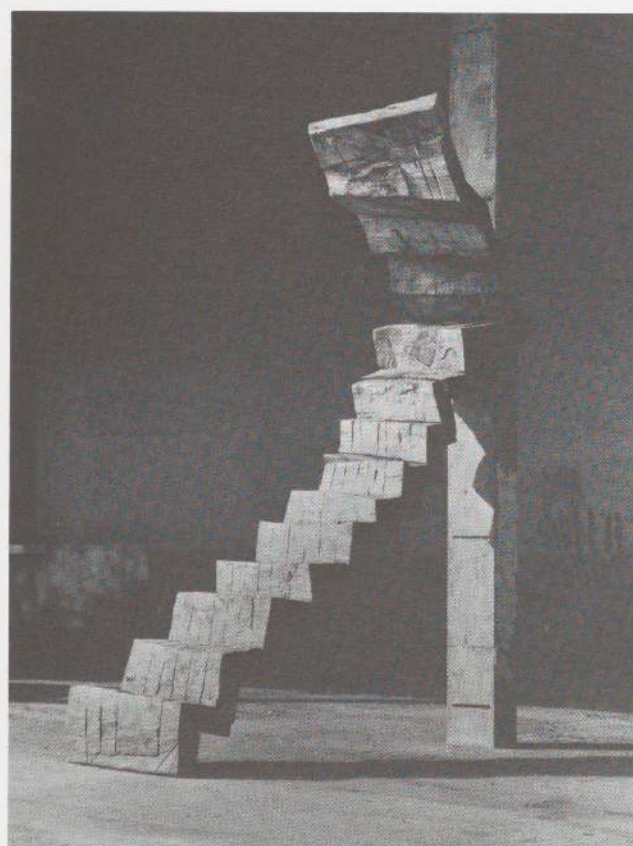
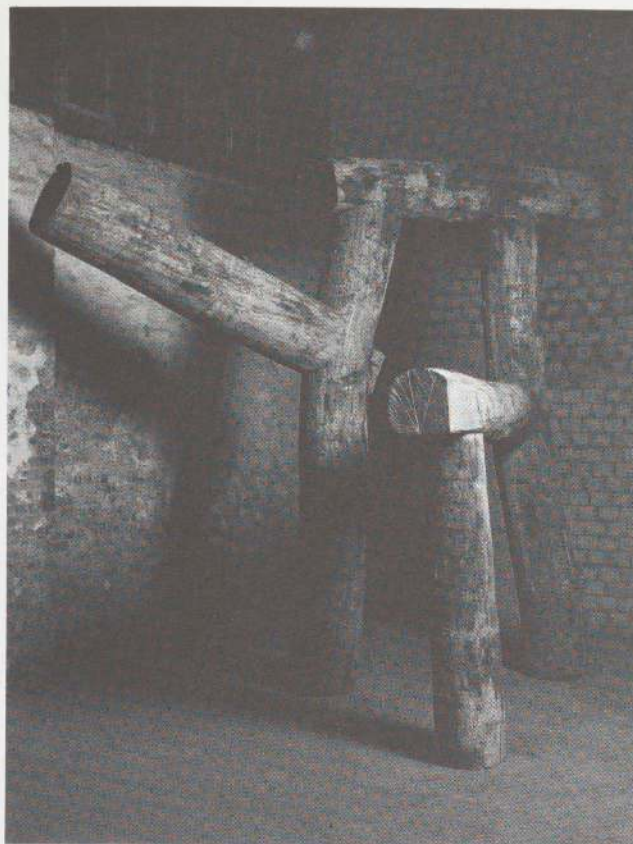


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### projects

Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, the new **projects** series has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments in a process involving an active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of new developments in the visual arts. The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Lannan Foundation, and the Wallace Funds, established by the founders of Reader's Digest.

**Cover: *Descending Chair*. 1979–80. Pear wood, 7' 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 59" x 59" (220 x 150 x 150 cm). Installation at Museum of Applied Arts, Prague, 1982**



**Houses. 1984. Oak and iron; five structures, largest 8' 4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 49<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 6' 6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (256 x 125 x 200 cm). Detail of installation at Riverside Studios, London, 1985**

**Boban. 1986. Oak, 11' x 11' 2" x 10' 10" (335 x 340 x 330 cm). Photo: Philipp Schönborn, courtesy Galerie Walter Storms, Munich**

**Stairs. 1982–84. Oak and iron, 13' 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 70<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 8' 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (425 x 180 x 270 cm). Photo: Philipp Schönborn, courtesy Galerie Walter Storms, Munich**

### magdalena jetelová

The sculpture of Magdalena Jetelová forces itself to be noticed. The massive, monumental scale of its rough-hewn wood and the energy of its precariously tilting parts dominate our space and compel a response. Fundamental, man-made objects for shelter, repose, mobility, and escape in Jetelová's work appear inexplicably and dramatically changed into sources of amusement or anxiety. Houses, chairs, and stairways become universal symbols of our civilization that confront and overwhelm us. Their utilitarian purpose no longer quite applicable, these structures could easily be taken for the ruins of some distant culture.

The most powerful effect of these pieces is their changed scale, generally from human to monumental. A chair has grown to be twice our height, yet a house is so reduced that a person could barely stand upright inside. The works also give the impression of being incomplete, damaged, or abandoned. For example, small houses of 1984 lean dramatically to one side; one even lacks a roof, leaving its underlying framework exposed. Massive staircases lead nowhere, and some from the early eighties appear in danger of collapsing, although iron underpinning prevents them from doing so. With little visible means of support, wood steps spill out along the floor, or turn in upon themselves as they reach toward the ceiling. A witty spirit often inhabits these works. A seven-foot-high chair of 1979–80 is installed at the top of a flight of stairs, like an abandoned throne, with its longer, forward leg extended one step below the others. The chair appears to be descending the stairs of its own volition. A nearly eleven-foot-high chair of 1982–83, lopsided and very roughly worked, is installed in a leading position before rows of stacked, smaller chairs, hence its title, *The March*.

The two works in the present exhibition, *Boban* and *Crossing*, reflect the most recent developments in Jetelová's series of chairs and stairways. *Boban*, of 1986, is even more elemental and unfinished in appearance than the chairs that preceded it. Huge oak logs, barely smoothed, are fitted together to form tilting arms and legs, but the piece lacks a seat and back. Creating an imbalance in this architectonic structure of posts and lintels, *Boban*'s oddly angled legs convey a sense of awkward movement. This chair, even more than the earlier ones, seems capable of plodding about with a life all its own. The further reduction of form apparent in *Boban* and the ambiguity of its title (a nickname which does not translate) are characteristic of Jetelová's most recent explorations, which leave room for wider interpretation. *Crossing*, also made in 1986, incorporates a sporadic series of steps, a solid trail of raw oak that tilts and turns unevenly, as if swaying. Only the backmost corner of this ascending pathway is anchored to the ground. The piece totters on feeble legs—thin wooden strips that seem barely able to bear the work's weight—and ends abruptly, without support, in midair. Both works generate uneasiness about their stability and symbolically instill a vague angst over man's survival.

Certain facets of Jetelová's work bear comparison with that of other artists. Jackie Winsor's seemingly simplistic uses of large-scale, raw materials come to mind, as do Alice Aycock's earlier experiments with huge, nonfunctional constructions in wood. Charles Simonds's and Anne and Patrick Poirier's fabricated ruins of mythical civilizations share the timeless quality of Jetelová's work, and the preoccupation with balance and

All works collection the artist.

structure apparent in Richard Serra's sculpture is similarly evident in Jetelová's. Finally, Jetelová's overgrown chairs and stairways elicit the same disquieting response that the specter of the familiar transformed produces in the paintings of Anselm Kiefer.

An interesting aspect of such comparisons is that the above artists essentially emerged in the seventies and are, for the most part, of Jetelová's generation. Yet after her brief sojourn to study under the sculptor Marino Marini in Milan in 1967–68, Jetelová was largely cut off from the international art scene as a result of the political changes that closed Czechoslovakia's borders. Certain Western books and periodicals could be obtained with effort, but there were few, if any, occasions to see work that had been produced abroad. Opportunities for major exhibitions of contemporary Czech art grew increasingly rare, and the Czech avant-garde became more dispersed. Jetelová began her career as a member of the international artistic community, sharing its concerns, but during the subsequent period of relative isolation in Prague she developed the unique and powerful artistic vocabulary that she continues to explore today. Indeed, the architecture of her native city, with its lively mix of medieval, Mannerist, and Baroque styles casting an otherworldly aura over winding streets, steep stairways, jutting balconies, and occasional tilting walls, has most certainly been a sustaining inspiration in Jetelová's work.

Jetelová renewed her ties with the international art community in mid-1985, when she relocated to West Germany after having worked there on a grant in 1984. Although her rudimentary, representational sculpture has certain affinities with contemporary German art—for example, with the sculpture that Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz have produced in the eighties—Jetelová stands apart from the German mainstream in her singular iconography, avoidance of the human figure, and focus on structure. Her sculpture is indeed expressive, but only as a result of the artist's calculated manipulation of her medium. The control she demonstrates in cutting the overwhelmingly large, heavy tree-trunks that form her sculpture is awe-inspiring. The crude look of her roughly cut raw wood is quite deliberate. The vertical striations on the surfaces of her staircases, for example, are incised for aesthetic effect. (In her earliest sculpted tables and cabinets, by contrast, she skillfully worked thick pieces of wood into polished, curving surfaces.) Given the scale and mass of her medium, these expressive elements could not have been created spontaneously in a moment of high emotion. Contemplative works, these pieces are carefully executed to induce certain effects rather than to embody a particular mood.

In her monumental sculpture, Magdalena Jetelová confronts us with objects that are not foreign relics after all, but the reflections of certain aspects of contemporary civilization, much magnified.

Diane Farynyk  
Curatorial Assistant  
Department of Painting and Sculpture

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Milena Kalinovska for her generous cooperation in all phases of this exhibition.

## biography

Born Semily, Czechoslovakia  
June 4, 1946

To Munich and Düsseldorf, 1985

## education

Academy of Visual Arts, Prague, 1965–71

Accademia di Brera, Milan, 1967–68

## selected individual exhibitions

1986 Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden\*

Galerie Silvia Menzel, Berlin

1985 Riverside Studios and Serpentine Gallery, London\*

1984 Galerie Walter Storms, Munich

1979 Neruda Street Theater, Prague\*

## selected group exhibitions

1986–87 Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle, Cologne; Staatliche Kunsthalle, Berlin; Museum Villa Stuck, Munich  
*Dimension V: Tensions/Sculpture Today\**

1986 The Sixth Biennale of Sydney\*

1985 Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna  
*Art with Obstinacy\**

Museum Ulm, *Magirus 117*

1983 The Tate Gallery, London, *New Art\**

Lothringerstrasse Artists Workshops, Munich  
*Eight Artists from Prague in Munich\**

House of Culture Gong, Prague  
*Painting and Sculpture*

1982 Museum of Applied Arts, Prague  
*The Chair in the 20th Century*

1981 Little Quarter, Prague  
*Dvorky 81: Sculpture and Objects\**

## selected bibliography

Collier, Caroline. "Flames in Places," *Studio International* (London), vol. 198, no. 1011 (December 1985), pp. 44–46

Kontova, Helena. "Magdalena Jetelová," *Flash Art* (Milan), no. 124 (October–November 1985), p. 57

Miller, Sanda. "A Sculptor from Prague," *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture* (Ann Arbor), no. 6 (1987), forthcoming

\*The exhibition was accompanied by a publication.