Sculpture from the collection : June 17-August 20, 1995, the Museum of Modern Art, New York

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SCULPTURE
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The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Installation: Kynaston McShine, Senior Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture
Text: Amelia Arenas, Museum Educator, Department of Education
Research: Aruna d'Souza and Leslie Jones

This is the first in a series of publications on the contemporary works in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The series is made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Vito Acconci. American, born 1940.

Peeling House. 1981.

Mixed mediums; approximately, 9'1" x 7'4" x 7'4" (276.9 x 223.5 x 223.6 cm).

Purchase, Martin Sklar Fund, and anonymous funds, 1986. Photo: Kate Keller

For thousands of years houses have embodied the social sense of self. Here is a house that is actually like a person: in order to enter it, visitors must "undress" it. As they pull the rings at the house's neckline, a sequence of cloth walls rises, revealing successively under the yellow-raincoat facade a new garment of camouflage, snakeskin, flashy disco satin, gold lamé. Since this can only happen with the collaboration of several members of the audience, the act becomes a kind of collective striptease in which all are at risk, especially when the terrifying nudity of this body is revealed in the ominous swastika inside the house.

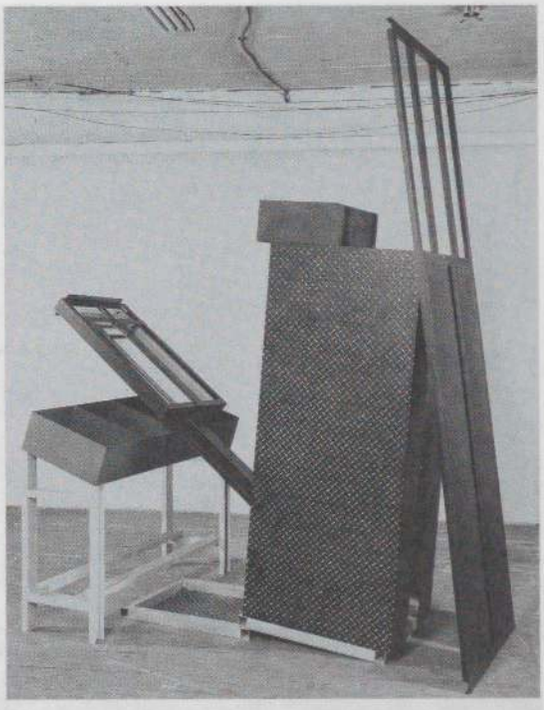
There are perhaps more questions here than answers. How many of these references are to identity and how many to fashion? Is the swastika true to the house's identity? Is the palm-frond roof a reference to "primitive" dwellings or to the cultivated exoticism of holiday resorts? We cannot be sure, but the desire to enter this dwelling might prompt some personal revelation. According to Acconci: "This should be the kind of home that makes you a stranger inside it. If the house makes you cozy, if you can snuggle into it, then you're lost in the past . . . but, if the house makes you itch, if you do a double-take, then you snap out of the present, you can have time to think about the future and change."

Siah Armajani. American, born Iran, 1939.

Elements Number 30. 1990.

Diamond plate aluminum, painted steel, and mirrors stained with transparent color, 9'5" x 53⅞" x 7' (289.5 x 136.6 x 213.3 cm).

Gift of Agnes Gund, Robert F. and Anna Marie Shapiro, Jerry I. Speyer, and the Norman and Rosita Winston Foundation, Inc., Fund, 1991. Photo: Courtesy Max Protetch Gallery



Siah Armajani's sculptures are arrangements of prefabricated construction parts—windows and doors, steel sheets, screens, bars, and frames—propped against each other or stacked as one would find them jumbled together in a warehouse.

Taken out of their original context, these fragments are like words written without concern for syntax or grammar. We feel the urge to reorder them according to memories of the functions they normally have, which of course is impossible. And yet, precisely because of their haphazard array, these things, which would ordinarily go unnoticed in the house or the office, acquire an unexpected monumentality. Instead of encouraging a distanced contemplation, however, Armajani's work stimulates in the viewer an impulse to re-create order, and an alternative one at that, since the pieces of this architectural puzzle are incomplete.

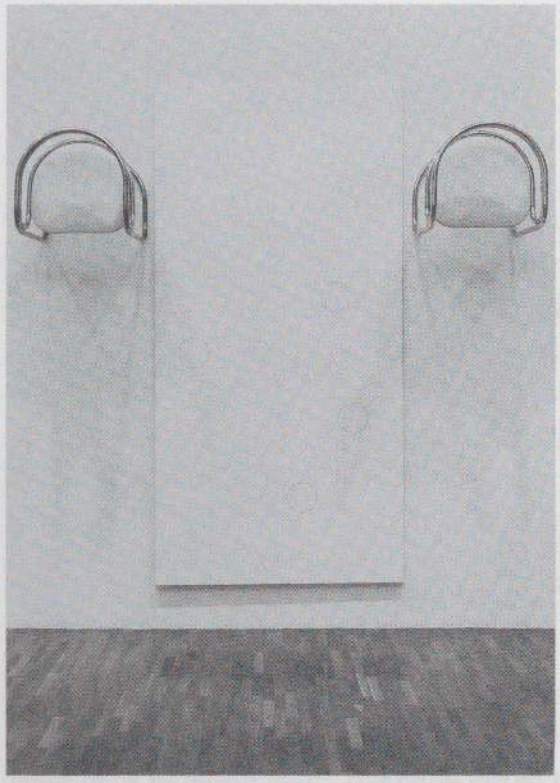
"The house," says Armajani, "does not appear to me first in terms of houseness, but rather in terms of its individual parts, or what I call its instruments—walls, doors, floor, etc." The presence of these familiar "instruments" gives Armajani's sculpture a public, even democratic, dimension. His long involvement with public sculpture has made a mark on all his works. As Kate Linker explains, these works refuse to behave as "privileged" objects: "Aiming to be useful, they entertain relations with the audience that remove them from their metaphoric pedestal, thereby toppling sculpture into social space."

John Armleder. Swiss, born 1948.

Untitled. 1986.

Synthetic polymer paint and China ink on canvas, two chrome and vinyl chairs; overall, 8'¼" x 7'9¼" x 28" (244.3 x 236.8 x 71.1 cm).

Gift of Raymond J. Learsy and Gabriella De Ferrari, 1991. Photo: Kate Keller



When we enter a museum gallery, we respond to a discreetly imposed order. John Armleder upsets that order by hanging two chairs on the wall. The effect is disorienting in more than the obvious way, especially since between the two chairs is an elegant abstract painting; its position somehow alters its status—and that of every other picture hanging on the museum's walls.

The high modernist design of the chairs, with their gleaming chrome armrests and slick profiles, even their neat arrangement, brings into the museum the impersonality of a corporate lobby. By placing this generic modernist picture literally at the same level as the chairs, Armleder makes us see it as yet another utilitarian object. In this odd context abstract art becomes banal, as the utopianism and spirituality associated with its origins in the works of Malevich, Mondrian, and Kandinsky are neutralized by the painting's overtly decorative function. Armleder says: "The irony of my work is not aimed at the art of those times . . . but my work is linked to a very different period. The work might look like a completed and meaningful picture, but it has nothing to do with purity. It's only a stupid painting with colors and forms."

Richard Artschwager. American, born 1923.

Untitled. 1994.

Five wood and metal pieces, 26½" x 90½" x 22 ½" (67.4 x 230 x 57.2 cm); 29½" x 42" x 32½" (74.9 x 106.6 x 82.6 cm); 13'2" x 36" x 50" (401.6 x 91.5 x 127 cm); 46 x 16¼ x 13½" (117 x 34.4 x 41.3 cm); 6'8" x 29" x 12½" (203.2 x 73.8 x 31.6 cm).

Gift of Agnes Gund and Robert F. and Anna Marie Shapiro Fund, 1994. Photo: Kate Keller

Much of the art of the last thirty years stems from the artists' shared ambition to intensify our experience of the world—in a sense, to make the reality in which we live more real. One may wonder whether that hasn't been the goal of art all along; but, since minimalism entered the scene in the 1960s, it has encouraged us to perceive that reality in a more concrete way. For example, space, as Richard Artschwager says, "is an abstraction that grows naturally out of looking at, looking into, looking through, walking, opening, closing, sitting, thinking about sitting, passing by, etcetera."

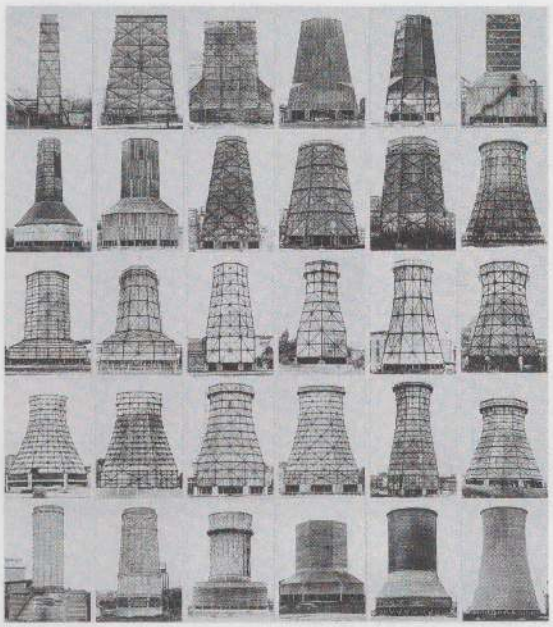
These cumbersome objects, scattered around the gallery, make us aware of space simply by getting in our way, except that they seem to complicate space on more than a purely physical level. The crates make us conscious of what we expect from art by seeming completely out of place in a museum, by turning a gallery into a loading dock. Yet, because of their opacity and their calculated oddity as art works, we find ourselves walking around them, interpreting their enigmatic forms, and hoping to get at their content.

Artschwager's eccentric objects have a complex genealogy that includes the rigors of minimalism as well as the twisted humor of funk and Pop art. But perhaps most relevant are his early years as a furniture maker—a trade to which he might owe his keen awareness of the physical and psychological behavior with which we respond to utilitarian things.

Bernd and Hilla Becher. German, born 1931 and 1934.

Anonymous Sculpture. 1970.

Thirty photographs and text panel with reproduction; overall, 6'11⅝" x 6'2½" (207.3 x 188.4 cm). Gertrud A. Mellon Fund, 1970. Photo: Kate Keller



The creation of categories is a fundamental operation of thinking. It involves organizing the seemingly endless things of the world according to observed similarities; most importantly, it is what allows us to discern difference. Since they began collaborating in 1959, Bernd and Hilla Becher have made the impulse to classify the very subject of their work.

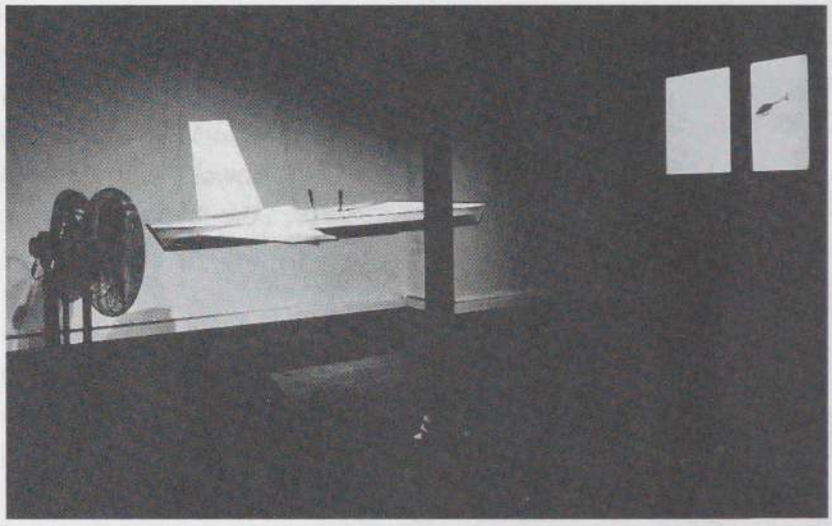
At the time, Bernd Becher was making paintings of vernacular industrial architecture and sought the help of Hilla Wobeser, a commercial photographer, to make photographs as aids for his paintings. It soon became clear that producing such "objective" records was a challenge. They went on to systematically photograph water and gas tanks, and industrial facades, among other things, collecting samples from Europe and America. The detached, nearly scientific character of photography made it the ideal tool for the pursuit of their encyclopedic ambition. Their pristine but matter-of-fact images are the result of a rigorous struggle to maintain the mechanical character of the photograph and to resist the impulse to bend it to expressive or painterly ends.

In the context of modern art's romance with subjectivity and abstraction, it might seem surprising to find that the artists' intentions are as crisp and clear as the pictures themselves and the texts that accompany them. The Bechers recognize as their key influence the work of the photographer August Sander, who spent more than two decades of his life searching and classifying archetypes of the German people.

Chris Burden. American, born 1946.

The Flying Kayak. 1982.

Canvas and wood kayak, wood staircase, four electric fans, 16mm film loop, and projector, 11'4" x 28' 2" x 13'7" (345.5 x 859 x 514.2 cm).
Purchase, 1989.

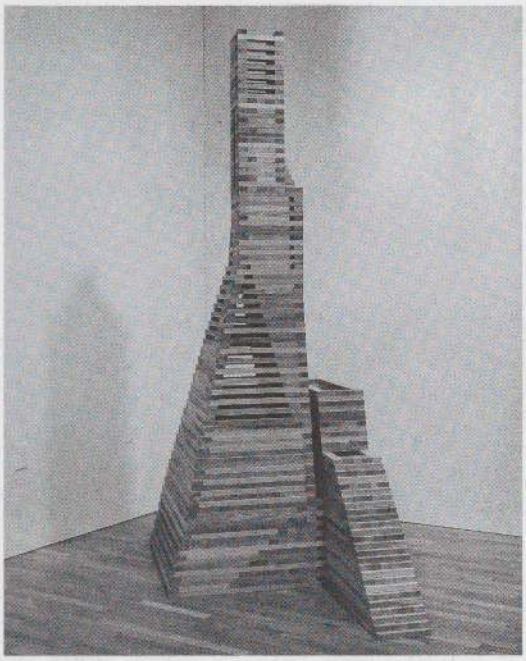


Chris Burden became known in the 1970s for a series of arresting performances in which he exposed his own body to danger: he had himself shot with a pistol; he lay inert on the floor, his arms covered with slabs of glass set on fire; he had himself crucified on a Volkswagen. In each case, however, Burden, once a science student, calculated physical risk astutely and minimized his jeopardy. And yet, if the artist was never seriously hurt, the act of witnessing his trials threatened the psychological safety that audiences traditionally enjoy in art museums.

After the 1970s Burden abandoned performance art to make very different kinds of works, such as the one in this exhibition. *The Flying Kayak* is a small canvas boat, equipped with wings and a rudder, suspended ten feet above the ground by steel cables, and tossed around the space of the gallery by a set of industrial fans. Burden projects on the wall a film loop of a hovering helicopter, to contribute to the illusion.

Seen in the context of the high drama of the earlier works, *The Flying Kayak* might seem funny, even ridiculous. Yet this work shares with those early ritualistic performances Burden's curiosity about the impact of technology on our imagination.

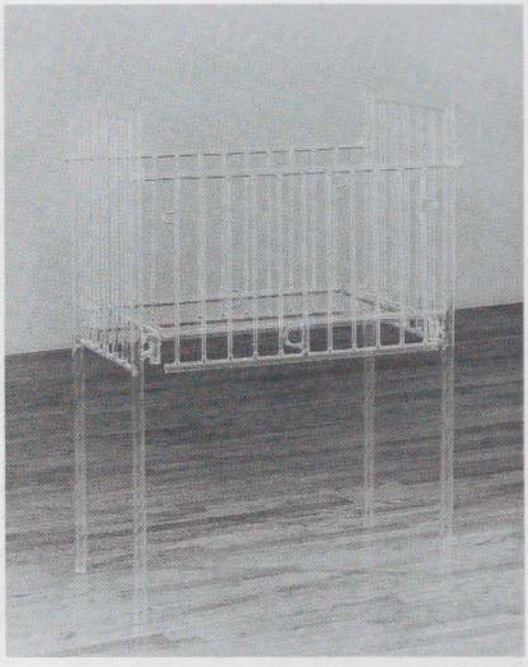
Jackie Ferrara. American, born 1929.
A200 AJUT. 1979.
Pine, 7' 3" x 53½" x 31½" (221 x 130.5 x 80 cm).
Amicus Foundation, Inc., Fund, 1979. Photo: Kate Keller



Jackie Ferrara insists that making art is the result of the desire to build. By her own account, her working process is maddeningly methodical. She stacks hundreds of thin slabs of wood of different sizes into towers and pyramids. At first her sculpture recalls the love of systems of her minimalist predecessors, who chose the simplest forms for their works. But unlike them, Ferrara makes her structures highly irregular. We are encouraged to walk around her works, scanning their surfaces for the delicate play between the tones and veins of the wood; but their different planes refuse to merge into a whole image. As soon as we see another side, we seem to lose the mental image of the previous one.

Ferrara designs the structures of her pieces through intricate mathematic calculations, a process so conceptual, in fact, that until those numerical relationships become physically realized in the work, not even she can visualize the shape they will take. Similarly, it is difficult to come up with a cultural framework for these objects. Ferrara says: "If I wanted to evoke anything, it would be something you couldn't place, something ahistorical. I'd like my sculpture to imply forms so ancient they precede recorded history or belong 3,000 years in the future. Or come from Mars." Curiously, for all their monumental proportions, Ferrara's sculptures are rather small, closer, in fact, to the size of the human body than to that of any kind of building, which might explain why they feel so familiar in their strangeness.

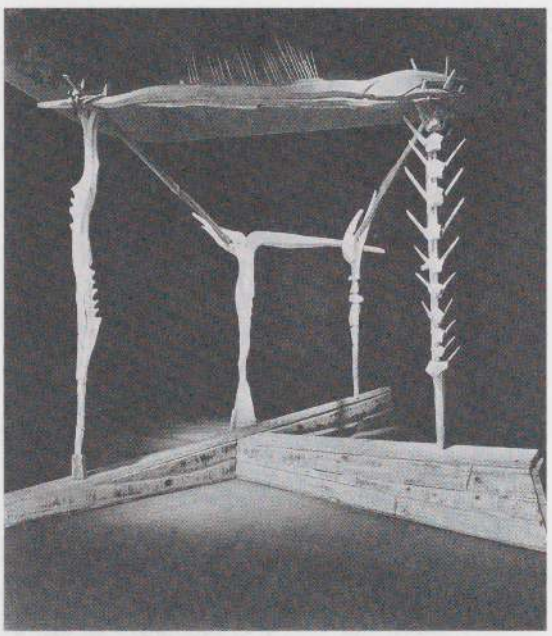
Mona Hatoum. Lebanese, born 1952.
Silence. 1994.
Glass, 49⅞ x 36⅞ x 23⅛" (126.6 x 59.2 x 43.7 cm).
Robert B. and Emilie W. Betts Foundation Fund, 1995. Photo: D. James Dee



Talking about one of her recent works, Mona Hatoum explained that she was "trying to create a feeling of unease . . . to destabilize the space, so that when you walk in, you literally feel the ground shift below your feet." Yet the intense emotions her work provokes come also from the complex chain of associations that these purely physical sensations accompany. In *Silence*, for example, Hatoum has built a small cage of glass tubes, which seems to hover weightlessly. That the fragile structure can easily be shattered does not make it any less threatening, especially since its shape suggests a child's crib, and hence, it evokes an absent but vulnerable body.

Hatoum has long been fascinated by the fantasies that govern the sense of the body in an age dominated by technology. Recently she has used sound and video records of ordinary exploratory medical procedures in order to reveal the invisible and forbidding image of the body within. *Silence* can also be seen in this context: the hollow network of transparent tubes brings to mind the paraphernalia of research laboratories but also the interior of the body—organs, nerves, blood vessels. Thus the work becomes a metaphoric meeting place for the man-made and organic structures on which life depends.

Frederick J. Kiesler. American, born Austria, 1890–1965.
Galaxy. 1947–48 (base remade 1951).
Wood and rope, 11'11" x 13'10" x 14'3" (363.2 x 421.6 x 434.3 cm).
Gift of Mrs. Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1991. Photo: Soichi Sunami



Installations—works of art that are environments—have been a favored medium in art since the 1960s. This represents a shift from the idea of looking at an art object on a pedestal or frame to finding oneself in a *situation* that involves the body as much as the eyes. Though the idea is as old as cave painting, in the context of contemporary art it might be traced to the panoramic effect of Jackson Pollock's large-scale paintings, which envelop the viewer and transform the neutral space of the museum gallery into a charged arena.

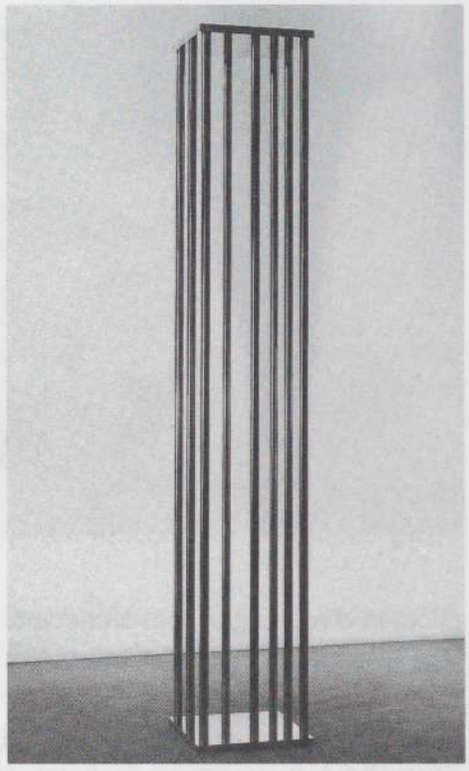
Kiesler's *Galaxy* can be seen as a forerunner of this tendency. An architect and theater designer until the end of his life, Kiesler began as a sculptor early in the century in Vienna. The uncanny poetry of his work and his sense of spatial drama developed out of the merging of all these modes. This room without walls, made of carved wood beams and driftwood columns, was first used as the stage set for a production of *The Poor Sailor*, by composer Darius Milhaud and playwright Jean Cocteau, a story about a man's journey home from the sea. Kiesler's environment poetically merged the two worlds in which the plot developed—the ocean and the harbor. He created a psychic "interior" space whose rough shapes, bound with rope or jointed like bones, put one in mind of the inside of a body.

Walter de Maria. American, born 1935.

Cage II. 1965.

Stainless steel, 71'¼" x 14'¼" x 14'¼" (216.5 x 36.2 x 36.2 cm).

Gift of Agnes Gund and Lily Auchincloss, 1993.



Like many artists of his generation, Walter de Maria has worked in a variety of mediums, ranging from austere, nearly minimalist sculpture to works such as *Lightning Field*, a spectacular environmental work made by erecting hundreds of electric rods on a large area of land in New Mexico, and provoking a continuous lightning storm. All de Maria's work in various mediums falls under the rubric "conceptual art," a mode in which the art work is seen not as a precious object but as the physical instrument to render ideas visible. *Cage II* is a good example of this.

A stainless-steel structure that looks deceptively like a luxurious abstract sculpture, the work pays homage to one of the most original artists of the second part of this century—John Cage—by literally rendering his last name. The conceptual "action" here, however, involves more than a pun. While the scale of the piece—slightly over life-size—might make one think of a human body, the space within it is too small to contain one. Moreover, the ideas conjured up by the title are in conflict with the high-tech aesthetic of the work and with its open structure, which one could easily penetrate with the thrust of an arm. If anything, one might see this elegant but inadequate cage as a monument to those who, like Cage, escape the constraints of conventional definitions.

Mario Merz. Italian, born 1925.

Places with No Street (Luoghi senza strada). 1987.

Aluminum wire mesh, stones, twigs, neon tubing, transformer, and wire, 6'6¾" x 21' x 28' (200 x 640.5 x 854 cm).

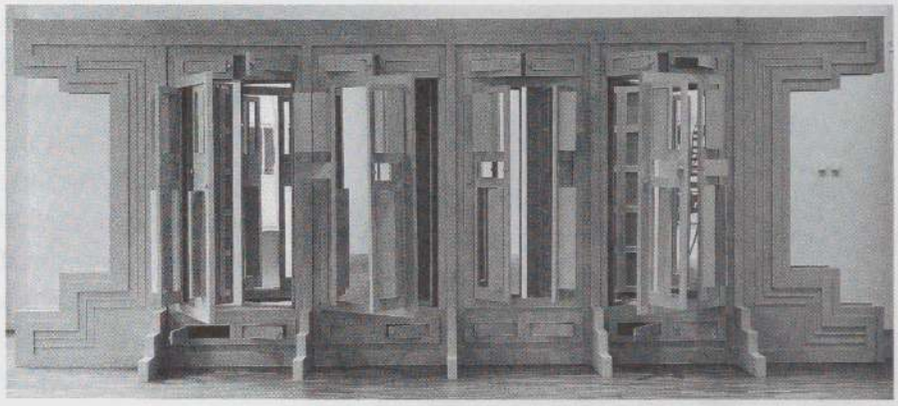
Given anonymously and by the Enid A. Haupt Fund, 1993. Photo: Kate Keller

Mario Merz has been using the central motif in this installation, the dome, since the late 1960s. He has explained that this form, associated with the igloo, the traditional Eskimo dwelling and with the heavenly vault, is his alternative to the right-angled structures that dominate modern architecture. To be sure, the arrangement has a markedly "primitive" character, but Merz's combination of natural and industrial materials complicates a reading of this archetypal form. Sheets of wire mesh hang loosely over the steel structure like transparent membranes; massive stone slabs lean precariously against the light structure. And, although the dome is open, the thick carpet of twig bundles on the ground, and the enigmatic string of neon light numbers that pave the narrow path through it, present obstacles to passage.

Merz made *Places with No Street* for an exhibition in the church of La Saltpêtrière hospital in Paris. The work was created specifically for a site originally meant for ritual, which adds to the ceremonial character of the ensemble. Curiously, the cryptic numerical sequence in the installation represents a mathematical series discovered by Fibonacci, a medieval monk. By adding to each number in the sequence the number preceding it, Fibonacci determined the pattern of leaf growth in certain plants, and the reproduction rate of rabbits. In this context, one might see Merz's *Places with No Street* as a symbolic site where the cultural impulse to build is identified with the infinite order of nature.

Mary Miss. American, born 1944.

Arrivals and Departures: 100 Doors. 1986.
One hundred hinged and movable parts of painted wood and mirrors,
9' x 23'2½" x 64" (274.3 x 707.4 x 152.4 cm).
Blanchette Rockefeller Fund, Robert F. and Anna Marie Shapiro Fund, and purchase, 1988.
Photo: Kate Keller



In Mary Miss's *Arrivals and Departures*, one hundred doors fan out of a freestanding wall supported by a set of legs, much like a theater set, or the movable panels sometimes used in museum exhibitions. The effect is disorienting, since the impulse to enter or to peek through these doors is frustrated by the fact that they lead nowhere and conceal nothing. If anything, the work confounds the notions of exterior and interior, as snippets of the objects and the people in the gallery are reflected on the doors' glass and mirror panes.

Mary Miss has explained that she is fascinated by symbols "that connect the known with the unknown" precisely because of their ordinariness. The door is such a symbol. Opening and closing it, we fine-tune the delicate balance between the private and public spheres. Yet, as it defines the social space we share, literally keeping things in their place, the door also embodies deep-seated desires and anxieties about order. Seeing one hundred doors on a single wall exacerbates those anxieties, making us feel that irrational forces might dwell in the most functional things. The artist says: "I would never say that my aim was to create an imaginary world. I'm interested in questioning the boundaries—physical, social, or emotional—that we take for granted. My fantasy is to be able to build something that can trigger memories."

Joel Shapiro. American, born 1941.

Untitled (house on shelf). 1974.

Bronze, 12⅞" x 2½"x 28⅛" (32.5 x 6.4 x 71.5 cm).

Purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and an anonymous donor, 1975. Photo: Kate Keller

One day, when he was a young artist, Joel Shapiro hammered six pieces of wood together, put the result on the floor, and wondered whether he had made a house or a hexagon. Since then, he has experimented with building extremely simplified versions of such archetypal things as a dwelling or a human body, pushing reduction right to the point where the object would nearly lose its identity and become nonobjective. Somehow, stripped of all anecdotal references, the image—in this case, a house—becomes unexpectedly potent. Shapiro also shrinks the object, stopping right before it would threaten to disappear against the background, and places it at eye level on a shelf.

We expect that simplification results in a purer, more essential image, which would be true, were it not for the deliberate errors of perspective in the piece. The back of the house, for example, is broader than its front, and the little path doesn't lead straight to the door. Why should all this matter? Shapiro's object makes us aware that perspective might be more than an old artistic trick, a schematic imitation of the way our eyes organize things in space. Since its invention in the Renaissance, perspective has brought to representation a reassuring logic. As the viewer tries in vain to adjust his or her vantage point in order to correct the house's distortions, perspective turns into an uneasy metaphor for one's place in the world.

Shapiro explained: "I really felt that the house was the past and the road was the future, but that the space between roof and road was somehow the perceptual space of the piece, the present, the important thing."

Robert Therrien. American, born 1947.

No Title. 1993.

Painted wood, brass, and steel, 9'5½" x 10' 10" x 9'1½" (288.4 x 330.2 x 278.3 cm).
Purchase, 1994. Photo: Kate Keller

During the 1960s the minimalists tried to create a kind of sculpture whose meanings depend solely on the viewer's perception of concrete physical things, such as volume, scale, and space. In order to render this purely sculptural experience as directly as possible, the minimalists used geometric forms whose very simplicity would discourage all representational associations with objects in the world.

In Therrien's work, we can still see the impact of this principle. The form can be read at once; the structure is self-evident. Moreover, like all minimalist sculpture, Therrien's object bears no trace of the human hand. Ironically, this puzzling work whets our appetite for precisely such references, and this is just where Therrien departs from minimalism. Simple as it is in construction, his sculpture bears all the features of mass-produced furniture. There is something ominous in seeing a seemingly utilitarian object of this size for which we fail to find an intelligible function. As we stand under this object we feel less like the visitor to a museum than like Alice in Wonderland.