



*Alice Aycock: Sculpture and Projects*. Cambridge and London: M.I.T. Press, 2005; pp. 1-8.

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# 1

## The Beginnings of a Complex

*The problem seems to be how to connect without connecting, how to group things together in such a way that the overall shape would resemble “the other shape, if shape it might be called, that shape had none,” referred to by Milton in Paradise Lost, how to group things haphazardly in much the way that competition among various interest groups produces a kind of haphazardness in the way the world looks and operates. The problem seems to be how to set up the conditions which would generate the beginnings of a complex.*

**Alice Aycock**

*Project Entitled “The Beginnings of a Complex . . .”  
(1976–77): Notes, Drawings, Photographs, 1977*

In Book 11 of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Death assumes the guise of two wildly dissimilar figures near Hell’s entrance, each with an extravagantly inconsistent appearance. The first, a trickster, appears as a fair woman from above the waist and a series of demons below, while the second—a “he,” according to Milton—is far more elusive. It assumes “the other shape” that Aycock refers to above.<sup>1</sup>

When searching for a poetic image capable of communicating the world’s elusiveness and indiscriminate randomness, Aycock remembered this description of Death’s incommensurability, which she then incorporated into her artist’s book *Project Entitled “The Beginnings of a Complex . . .” (1976–77): Notes, Drawings, Photographs*. Although viewing death in terms of life is certainly not an innovation, as anyone familiar with Etruscan and Greco-Roman culture can testify, seeing life’s complexity in terms of this shape-shifting allegorical

figure signaling its end is a remarkable poetic inversion. In this trope, death not only culminates life; it is its chimerical and dark equivalent. Standing at the threshold of Hell, it looks back at the vital forces it terminates, reflecting at once both time's multitudinous shapes and its cessation. Viewed metaphorically, Milton's Death is a mirror and a fissure in a closed universe that provides glimpses of heretofore unimagined possibilities.

This type of opening is a key stratagem in Aycock's work, which seeks to unlock a new space between juxtaposed worldviews. The price for this realization is high, of course, since it disrupts established patterns and ways of reacting to them. Ultimately it places all worldviews on notice and thus goes far beyond Marxist art's proclaimed ability to undermine a dominant ideology's mode of seeing and understanding. Moreover, this art supersedes the defamiliarization Russian formalists theorized that new works are capable of effecting when they alter the ideological and cultural terms used for both framing and experiencing the world. Aycock's art does so by empowering viewers so that they might continue the process of transforming the world long after a given piece has been created. In addition to subscribing to Viktor Shklovsky's admirable assessment that "the technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged,"<sup>2</sup> Aycock willingly abrogates part of the artist's traditional responsibility as the prime generator of a work's meaning when she enlists viewers as her ongoing collaborators in this process.

In citing Milton's mysterious image, Aycock condenses life's intricacies into a disruptive complex that she views as architectural and sculptural as well as mental and emotional. As we will see, this complex joins the presence of art with the otherness of schizophrenia: it builds even as it tears down. Moreover it demonstrates how this artist regularly

enlists images from the past and from other disciplines to serve double duty in her work, to create it even while dissipating it. In many of the pieces from the 1970s and early '80s for which she became famous, Aycock choreographs both her sculptures and scripts about them so that the binary opposites of presence and absence, creation and destruction—low-key late-twentieth-century surrogates for Life and Death—are deconstructed. Although her art might appear to have an edge over her art writing, since we are accustomed to regard artists' statement as supplements, neither the act of viewing the sculpture nor the reading of its supplementary text should be given primacy. Binaries in Aycock's art give way to *différance*—Jacques Derrida's special conjunction of "difference" and "deferring"—that is spatial in demarcating distinctions among closely associated entities and time-bound in delaying ultimate or transcendent meanings. Presence as authoritative meaning is destabilized in this postmodern work, and Aycock's sculpture—like Milton's shape-shifting Death—provides new perspectives on life.

Working in this vein in "*The Beginnings of a Complex . . .*," Aycock may have chosen to leave the ending of the above statement inconclusive because she envisioned the beginnings of the complex constituting her art as the first installment of an ongoing contract with her viewers. Aycock provides these viewers with a great number of meaningful and often contradictory clues and then encourages them to negotiate individually the terms in which her art is to be perceived. The basic stipulations may be hers, but the outcome, as she intended, can be highly personal, depending as it does on the individual understanding attained by viewers who willingly submit themselves to the initial and, in many cases, dizzying features of this obsessive work.

This book is concerned with Aycock's purposefully unwieldy complex, its development, and the many deliberate breaks in it, beginning in the late 1960s and early '70s and continuing for almost two decades of extraordinarily intense research that was based on a belief in art and sculpture as a mode of inquiry and not a stable

entity. This study will contend that Aycock rethought not only the role of the art object but also the mode of apprehending it. She attempted to discover the type of information art might convey and how it might do so. Moreover she intended to place viewers in situations where they would have to face this same problem. This two-phased epistemological quest, undertaken first by the artist and then by her viewers, involves taking substantial risks, as the process of looking at and understanding a given work of art is far more open-ended than usual: responses can be generalized even though individual reactions cannot be predicted.

Although her highly complex individual works might appear to lack a coherent meaning and a fixed identity, Aycock's overall oeuvre must be regarded with some sense of closure, as her series of works reveal overarching patterns and concerns that partially militate against the epistemological quandaries specific pieces can initiate. Moreover, by leaving individual pieces susceptible to the references and associations she provides, Aycock has created a situation of putative presence and notable absence that is applicable to her work and to the artist's traditional role. This inherent contradiction between single works and entire series—as well as between an individual piece's cogency and the accompanying text's apparent disruption of any straightforward efficacy—is one of the disconcerting and exciting dialectics on which her art is predicated. Although she often refers to her family history, voluminous reading, and far-ranging image file, her work, which remains insistently open to her own contradictions and therefore to viewers' interpretations, can frustrate those who wish to view individual pieces as closed circuits synonymous with their creator, as did the abstract expressionists and their critics.

Because I will be considering Aycock's individual works in terms of her overall oeuvre, this study may be able to achieve an overall conclusiveness about this challenging work that is impossible when examining only one example or a small group of them. To provide the necessary wider perspective, I will attempt to identify as

many of the iconographic sources for Aycock's works as possible and unravel many of its mysteries and deliberate obfuscations, knowing that such an approach will enrich the reader's overall understanding at the expense of impoverishing the direct apprehension of individual pieces, making them less confrontational and puzzling. While my approach may appear at times to undermine Aycock's radical attempt to project the task of making meaning out to viewers, I hope that readers will recognize this artist's incredible leaps from one symbolic system to another as concerted attempts to undermine established ideological pathways.

This book will also demonstrate how the openness Aycock courts in her art is relatable to new ways of viewing the world in the late twentieth century that are a legacy of the information age, first in terms of the widespread advance of the mass media in the mid-twentieth century and then in terms of the creation of PCs in the 1970s followed by changes enacted by the Internet at the century's end. Developed in tandem with this plethora of information were concomitant innovations in its storage and retrieval, as well as an increasing awareness of the ways it can be marshaled to ratify some worldviews while undermining others. By looking at Aycock's work chronologically, we can begin to see how it participates in the sheer wealth of this information age at the same time as it casts aspersions on monolithic views. Repeatedly this type of epistemological work creates puzzles with distinct breaks, establishing perceivable gaps in the ideological fabric of its contemporaneous world and in the individual work's rhetoric so that both its time and our views of it are fluid and disruptive. It allows us to imagine how people in the past might have fantasized, for example, about the ability to fly and to be in two places simultaneously that became realities in the twentieth century when airplanes and telephones substantially changed people's modes of travel and communication.

Moreover, this work makes us aware of the information age's enormous contributions to our ability to travel through time, and it enables us to assess the past from manifold perspectives that include present views while going far beyond them. Although individual pieces might appear strangely idiosyncratic and whimsical, as they often have in critical writings on Aycock's work, the first full-scale assessment of this art presented here reveals them to be part of a concerted and far-ranging attack on the limited understanding that comes from accepting a prevailing ideology. Though her work does participate in an information-age ideology, it attempts to counter, as we will see, ready acquiescence to the dictates of this and other worlds by viewing them all as contradictory, often mythic and poetic, and certainly subject to the playful excesses of debating that the Greeks dubbed "sophistry." Aycock's sculptures puncture the information age's apparently seamless web, making what she terms "tears in the universe," at the same time as they interrupt themselves, forcing viewers to think about both art's presumed cogency and the disinclination of her work to play into these assumptions. The consequent breaks in the ideological fabric of our time and the overturning of the ontological work of art, which in the past was deemed a surrogate being, will constitute two of the major subtexts in the account of her work that follows.

After looking at how Aycock pursued an epistemological mode for almost two decades, I conclude my investigation when she begins in the late 1980s to create elegiac and retrospective views of her previous works. Although her subsequent public sculptures build on a substantial number of the ideas examined in this study, they open a new and different chapter deserving its own publication. A postscript at the end of this book adumbrates the direction taken in Aycock's more recent pieces, briefly noting their reliance on the same virtual imaging techniques employed by such architects as Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid.

### *Moving from the 1960s to the '70s*

Maturing as an artist after the climactic 1960s, when vanguard art had often been equated with fashion and new styles seemed to coincide almost too conveniently with new fall listings, Aycock relied on fundamental aspects of three of the major and lasting currents of this hectic decade when she developed her work.

The first was epitomized in the '60s by the color field painting of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski. It adhered to the Platonic system of limiting viewers to a stirring and discrete format, termed "opticality" by critic and scholar Michael Fried to connote "a space addressed exclusively to eyesight," which it then encouraged viewers to transcend in the interest of universal values.<sup>3</sup> This art's high aspirations were indirectly critiqued by Fried's former close friend at Princeton in the 1950s, Frank Stella. Often associated with color field painting in the late 1960s, Stella offered the famous laconic observation, "What you see is what you see."<sup>4</sup> Aycock viewed his shaped paintings as the beginning of a trajectory that removed the art of painting from its close affiliation with the wall, so that it might become associated with the "specific objects" of minimalist Donald Judd.<sup>5</sup> Although she rejected the opticality of color field art, she regarded the shaped canvas as an antecedent for her own work.

The second major current that influenced Aycock's art is minimalism, a new development in the '60s known primarily through the work of Judd, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Morris (Aycock's professor in graduate school). Minimalism perpetuated aspects of formalism's holistic approach while, according to Morris, beginning to project works of art outward to their viewers, making their apprehension provocative exercises in phenomenological seeing—an approach crucial to Aycock's development.

The third approach that Aycock drew upon was conceptual art. Evidenced by the investigations of LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and Art & Language members, among others, conceptual art endeavored to equate art with concepts that could be circumscribed by language. LeWitt took pop artist Andy Warhol's tongue-in-cheek yet resigned view of himself as his television's consort and tape recorder's lifelong mate and transformed it into the dynamics of an "idea becom[ing] a machine that makes the art."<sup>6</sup> Aycock's art, as we will see, modifies aspects of both Warhol's and LeWitt's approaches by characterizing these couplings as schizophrenic and cyborgian.

Instead of making "art investigations"—Kosuth's term for his own conceptual work—traditional sculptors and painters had become content with art's "presentation" and with the viewer's transfixed expectation of a transcendent experience. Consequently, Kosuth saw such artists as decorators of "naïve art forms" rather than as philosophers.<sup>7</sup> Mindful of the difficulty, Aycock, who went through a conceptually oriented phase in her early work, first brings viewers close to her work before distancing them from it. She encourages them to come to terms with contradictory ways of perceiving it so that they straddle traditional boundaries by working both within and outside the limits of established media. In this way she differs from conceptual artist Douglas Huebler, who was willing to dispense with the importance of the art object. As critic and art historian Jack Burnham writes, Huebler

*propo[sed] that the percipient is the "subject" of art engaged in a self-producing activity through language, that has, itself, replaced "appearance" and become the virtual image of the work. Perception then, not being available through normal sensory experience, shifts "empiricism" to "metempiricism": concepts and relations conceived*

*beyond objects or material known through experience albeit related to such knowledge.*<sup>8</sup>

Although Aycock, like the conceptualists, wished her viewers to become involved in the work of interpretation, she was reluctant to dispense with the object, which often assumed the scale of architecture in her work. We might say that her best art in the 1970s and '80s connects Robert Morris's minimalist object, with its emphasis on phenomenological seeing, to a conceptual emphasis on the work that viewers must undertake in order to understand how art functions epistemologically. Then she complicates this process by subscribing to Derrida's open-ended signifiers.

In the 1960s, formalism and conceptual art used a number of strategies to ordain meaning, respectively, as transcendental or categorical. In contrast, some minimalists—Morris, in particular—aimed at restricting their viewers to a self-evident content attained through their physical bodies, which would ideally be situated in the pristine white galleries in which these works were then frequently exhibited.

One of Aycock's early important contributions to sculpture was to focus on the repetitive shapes of light and relatively easy balloon-frame wood construction, which optimistically reflected the skeletal frames of new buildings. She used this nineteenth-century type of construction—first developed in the United States to replace cumbersome, half-timbered work—together with minimalism's hybrid sculptural/architectural forms and conceptual art's emphasis on language. And she reconfigured these diverse elements, using ordinary lumber as her favored material, to engender a heretofore unparalleled complexity and freedom that could be as daunting and disorienting as it was exhilarating. One might say that she employed these carpentered formalist elements to attract viewers to lightly constructed skeletal forms that appeared domestic, or at least

familiar, without being sentimental. She augmented this '70s balloon-frame art with poured concrete and concrete block construction, again relying on a readily available building vernacular to create her sculptures. In creating these works she used minimalism to make viewers aware of their own bodies, and conceptual art to help them think epistemologically about their experiences while trying to reconcile the often contradictory clues her art provides. I believe her tact has been to turn the perception of sculpture into an apperception of the spatial and mental stages involved in approaching it. Only after moving through these processes are viewers equipped to frame these intentionally disjunctive experiences so that they might become meaningful for them.

From the beginning Aycock has believed in using her writings either on their own or in combination with a series of quotations as a means for elaborating on her drawings and sculptures. In her early work these conceptualist descriptions, which were affixed to gallery walls, were clear-cut ways to enumerate process and calculate measurements, particularly for outdoor installation pieces that were represented in the gallery by photographs. Soon Aycock began fantasizing about pieces as she was making them, and these reveries were in turn appended to the work in the form of extended labels. In 1977 the texts assumed the form of elaborate and strange stories, again presented on gallery walls, that complicated and enriched the possible meanings for a given work. Although not all of her sculptures were shown with texts, most of them were displayed this way, either separately or together in the form of an exhibition. Moreover, preliminary studies would often contain texts that were connected to them by labels or actual writing on the drawing itself. This penchant for joining art with allusive writing and suggestive titles, which has continued over the years, is a distinctive quality of this art.

Aycock's artistic contributions are part of a momentous transition separating modern from postmodern art that was undertaken by a number of artists coming of age in the early '70s. In addition to Aycock, members of this nonaffiliated group include Vito Acconci, Siah Armajani, Chris Burden, Gordon Matta-Clark, Mary Miss, and George Trakas, among others. The innovations of these artists, together with the work of minimalists and conceptual artists, presage the major direction art has taken in the past three decades, when its former autonomy has been undermined, making works more open-ended and meaning an ongoing, dynamic arbitration between artists and their viewers. Today, the change from an acceptance of styles based on formal similarities to an awareness of such designations as often highly artificial tags is widely accepted, even though the overall reasons for this transformation are not yet fully understood. As curator Donna DeSalvo has pointed out, "Understanding the shift in art from the late '60s to the '70s is one of the key problems facing art historians and contemporary art curators today."<sup>9</sup>

Elements of this change are no doubt due in part to the increasing respect for Marcel Duchamp's work, including his notes, that followed in the wake of his revived reputation, beginning in the late 1950s and continuing into the '60s. It is also evident in the epistemological turn in '60s art indebted to his work, which was subsequently transformed into an overall, verbally articulated program by such conceptual artists as Kosuth. This move from art's formerly intuited ontology to an epistemology of its strategies was also a driving force of the poststructuralist French theories of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. Reviewing Ferdinand de Saussure's structural analysis of the symbol, Barthes and Derrida focused on ongoing insights formulated by readers. Differing in his emphasis, Foucault historicized epistemology while examining it in terms of specific sets of codes that have wielded inordinate power on the human body when

information has been unquestionably accepted as knowledge. The net effect of these new critical views was to render empiricism problematic by regarding it as a consequence of a socially and historically constructed universe and not a direct mode of perceiving. While museum educators—still a relatively new profession in the 1960s—were relying overwhelmingly on empirical theories when demonstrating the power of art, artists were beginning to reassess this presumed bedrock of unmediated knowledge as well as their own reputed role in disseminating it.

As a key player in the modern/postmodern divide, Aycock is of interest for her reassessment of the work of art's presumed autonomy, as part of the widespread crisis of the art object following in formalism's wake, when it could no longer be regarded as the sole conveyor of meaning. This crisis was predicated on the concomitant problem of the artist's role, which was changing from modernist mythic form-giver to postmodern agent provocateur.

Since the early 1970s, the parameters of any discussion about postmodern works of art and their producers appeared to have been clearly drawn by Roland Barthes's 1968 essay "The Death of the Author."<sup>10</sup> Spelled with a capital "A," for irony, Barthes's Author may have been an esteemed individual in the past, but in the mid-twentieth century this personage was being reduced to the function of a *scriptor* who predictably conformed to a set of ongoing conventions. In his essay's conclusion, Barthes goes beyond this polarity to empower a new protagonist—the reader—and he predicts that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."<sup>11</sup> The situation, however, is not so easily resolved as his *coup de grâce* urbanely suggests. Although subjectivity may well be constructed through ongoing social practices, based on deeply ingrained ideological formations, it still assumes distinct forms that are one among a number of factors affecting the disposition of works of art.

Seen from a slightly different perspective, artistic intent is a wily and unreliable force. Writing almost a century apart, both Charles Baudelaire and Mark Rothko describe the element of surprise occurring to artists at the completion of a work. At that point they find themselves cut off from their art, and they recognize that their subsequent comments will be relegated to the category of informed viewers and no longer accepted as those of the indisputable creator. We might go further and question artistic intent before the work's completion as well. Since so many different and often contradictory ideas occur to artists during the creative process, which may extend over months and years, how, we might well ask, can one idea be privileged over others? Aycock refuses to solve this conundrum and instead exacerbates it at times, providing a series of quotations or statements about a given piece or several works in an exhibition that may or may not represent her intent. Rather than identifying the work with the artist and with her stated though often contradictory intentions, viewers are placed in the preeminent position of postmodern readers who are encouraged to rethink and reorient the work in the process of interpreting it.

This book is predicated on the internal rupture initiated by the proclaimed death and continued survival of the author, particularly in light of Aycock's own fascination with schizophrenia as a subject and also a strategy for making art. As an approach to art, schizophrenia provides a *raison d'être* for this study's necessary disparateness, in that meaning will be considered in terms of an ongoing dialectic between scriptor as an assigned function and author as a distinct individual. This dialectic is particularly apparent in the ways artists fulfill certain expected roles that are already scripted for them—presenting a heightened view of the world, for example, while provocatively refusing to provide a conclusive meaning for their work. In this situation, significations are posed without being entirely resolved, forcing critics

and art historians to look further afield for interpretive frames and encouraging them to focus on different contexts, each suggesting a range of interpretations. This approach of looking both closely and from a distance is crucial to understanding the mechanisms for meaning central to this type of art.

The problem facing anyone investigating Aycock's work is ultimately how one deconstructs a deconstructionist. How does one cope with an iconography of slipping signifiers that are explicitly presented as part of the structure of the work of art? In many respects Aycock's art is iconographic in a traditional as well as in a striking new sense. Its many references, which take great effort to unravel, do not seem pat and formulaic after one has analyzed them. Like involved mazes seen with clarity from a bird's-eye view, they again confuse and confound once one starts to traverse them. An artificer of intricate spatial and semiotic networks, Aycock in her mature work fabricates literal and figurative mazes that astonish viewers with a sense of the modern world's inordinate contingent "haphazard" complexes that are at once architectural, sculptural, and mental.

But like mazes, Aycock's complexes can be circumscribed and cogent pieces, even though their unity encapsulates the wrong turns, dead ends, and backtracking that often both fascinate and frustrate viewers accustomed to works of art with less recondite and more readily transcendent meanings. Coming soon after the hegemony of late formalist works that quickened viewers' perceptions with gestalts intended to stamp themselves at once on observers' minds, Aycock is part of a generation of artists who wished to slow down perception in order to draw out the complexities of apprehension. Derrida's *différance* is again apposite here, suggesting the puzzling and sustained route of reception central to Aycock's work.

### *The Complex: Sculpture as the Expanded Field*

In 1979, two years after it appeared in Aycock's *Project Entitled "The Beginnings of a Complex . . ."*, critic Lucy Lippard used the term "complex" in the title of an essay on eleven younger artists working with the concept of shelters.<sup>12</sup> A few months after Lippard's piece, minimalist critic and scholar Rosalind Krauss appropriated "complex" as the central term for one of her most highly lauded essays about new art, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field."<sup>13</sup> Although she focuses only on its landscape and architectural references rather than on the psychotic dimensions Aycock enumerates, Krauss's choice of the term is a fitting tribute to Aycock. After bemoaning the historicist category of modernist sculpture, which transforms new art into endless permutations of old ideas, thereby diminishing its radicalness, Krauss argues:

*There is no reason not to imagine an opposite term [for sculpture]—one that would be both landscape and architecture—which within this schema is called the complex. But to think the complex is to admit into the realm of art two terms that had formerly been prohibited from it: landscape and architecture—terms that could function to define the sculpture. . . . Our culture had not before been able to think the complex although other cultures have thought this term with great ease. Labyrinths and mazes are both landscape and architecture. . . . The expanded field is thus generated by problematizing the set of oppositions between which the modernist category sculpture is suspended.<sup>14</sup>*

Krauss's analysis updates Jack Burnham's "unobjects." Describing these new constructs in 1968, Burnham points out, "A polarity is presently developing between the finite, unique work of high art, i.e., painting or sculpture, and conceptions which can loosely be termed 'unobjects,' these being either environments or artifacts which resist