"Conversing about Contemporary Sculpture." In Glenn Harper and Twylene Moyer, eds. *Conversations on Sculpture*. Hamilton, NJ: International Sculpture Center, 2007; pp. 8-11.

Conversing about Contemporary Sculpture

by Robert Hobbs

In this collection of conversations with prominent sculptors published in *Sculpture* magazine as early as 1998 and as recently as 2006, one is made privy to the thoughts of a wide range of artists. In these interviews, each artist articulates his or her rationale for making the type of three-dimensional work that continues to be subsumed under sculpture's rubric. Viewing this art form as a necessary yet limiting hurdle, artists in this volume have understandably sought a raison d'être for their goals in concepts that extend sculpture's traditional purview. However, they have refused to become entrapped in their own personal taste, which most would refute as far too idiosyncratic and unpredictable to be relevant to general audiences. Such high-minded adherence to historically based views are evident in Cildo Meireles's interrogations of the ideological wrappings entailed by culturally defined spaces and Yinka Shonibare's eloquent descriptions of the British- and Dutch-manufactured cloth employing Indonesian designs that many African nationals in the 1960s and '70s viewed as inherently their own.

The overriding question appearing in conversations with these artists, as well as with others included in this anthology, is how to make art that is deeply felt without being merely idiosyncratic and how to create socially relevant work without veering away from the three-dimensionality that all continue to regard as sculpture's absolute basis. In order to avoid these twin pitfalls, most of these artists have sought justification for their work in terms of a series of alliances that includes one or more of the following: (1) architecture and human scale, (2) language viewed as object and artifact, (3) the semiotics of chosen materials that they reinforce, redirect, or obstruct, (4) the terms of their selected space or site, which helps to set the terms of their work, and (5) the spaces between known variables that may extend social, conventional, and even philosophical orientations.

In a word, what each artist is seeking is an *allegory* that will superintend and justify his or her work, endowing it with meaning and relevance, while allowing exploration of a range of ideas of particular interest. Allegories in recent sculpture have often assumed the form of referential and generative narratives, which can refer to iconographic meaning, values, artistic tropes, and even aesthetic conventions as long as they are viewed as symbolic means for interpreting works of art. Although this quest for allegory in sculpture goes back to the mid-20th century when Modernism's tenets were beginning to be questioned, it was not recognized as such at the time because Modernist rhetoric continued to demand an aesthetics of presence and self-revelation and thereby precluded acknowledging allegory's manner of subsuming art under an overarching aegis. Admitting allegory as a goal would have substituted absence for presence and deferral for immediate and even transparent meaning.

In the early and mid-'60s, *metaphor*—the poetic conjunction of dissimilar elements into a singular hybrid—was beginning to be questioned as a dominant sculptural trope by such Minimalists as Donald Judd and Robert Morris. They wished to obviate the strictures of virtual space, which had blanketed traditional sculpture in auras of suffused artiness at the same time that it precluded sculpture from taking a cold bracing walk in the world. Instead of creating such theatrical and virtual spaces as the one highlighted in Giacometti's *Hands Holding the Void (Invisible Object)* (1934), Judd and Morris wished to ascertain differences and similarities between sculpture and ordinary objects. While Judd focused on the special qualities of objects that made them into a new type of non-metaphorical sculpture, Morris began to mine ideas contained in the recently translated writings of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61). Wishing to depart from the grand Cartesian tradition initiated in the 17th century by the rationalist René Descartes, who had established a widely accepted basis for a mentally conceived universe, Merleau-Ponty re-inscribed the specificity of a body-centered approach. This phenomenologist's theories, in conjunction with a Marcel Duchamp revival well underway in the early '60s, enabled Morris to focus on interactions between actual viewers and the art context catalyzed by his seemingly sub-aesthetic objects. This interaction was predicated on viewing art in structuralist terms, i.e., looking at individual works of art in terms of overarching rules resulting in interstitial connections—a view in its ascendancy in the early '60s due to the popularity of Claude Lévi-Strauss's cultural anthropology. (This approach is somewhat related to allegory, even though structuralism's terms are usually implicit, being deduced after the fact, while allegories are consciously evoked and therefore generative.)

In the mid-20th century Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology ushered in an era of installation art predicated on integral relationships between human subjects and aspects of their habitual world, which were reconfigured to make them strange enough to elicit the type of eidetic reduction (bracketing) that phenomenologists have deemed necessary for understanding. This related emphasis on phenomenology and installation art paved the way for the hegemony of architectural sculpture and for sculptors who have been trained as architects. This collection of conversations incorporates men and women who studied architecture both formally and informally, including Alfredo Jaar and Maya Lin.

In regard to sculpture's affiliations with architecture, it's worth noting that Miroslaw Balka, who continues to use his childhood home as a studio, refers all of his works back to his personal history and chooses mathematical titles for his art based on his own size. In consideration of Balka's approach, we can readily conclude that both phenomenology and architecture play crucial formative roles in his art. The Cuban collective Los Carpinteros has similarly chosen to forge alliances between human scale and art by working in the gap between furniture and sculpture, as they create strange chests of drawers in the form of such objects as hand grenades. Both Balka's and Los Carpinteros's works extend outward to encompass viewers in their space, making their size and relationship to the work an essential component, thereby creating the type of dialogic exchanges between the two that Richard Deacon views as decisive for his art as well.

In addition to emphasizing spectators' integral role in the creation of works of art, Merleau-Pontian phenomenology has encouraged sculptors to think about the subject's place in reference to the work they create. Tim Hawkinson has described the perspective of his work as "being inside looking out," particularly when he maps his own view of his skin as if it were flayed. Intrigued with the curvature of the earth, Maya Lin makes us all subjects of our own planetary projection; in her sculptures she focuses on landscape elements, inviting viewers to walk through them and share their space. Maurizio Cattelan mentions "the possibility of changing masks and roles" and notes his interest, figuratively speaking, "in discovering the service entrance and the back stair in each building," thus underscoring the way that a phenomenological outlook has set the stage for all his art.

Beginning in the 1960s, all of these changes had enormous ramifications because the new initiatives seemed to remove the huge proviso of artifice from the field of art. Allegories, structuralism, and phenomenology, working separately and sometimes in tandem, permitted real objects and barely transformed materials to be brought into the realm of art as long as they were presented in terms of one or more of these overriding concepts that played on art's structure and/or context, as well as the viewer's awareness of it. Rather than having to make works that are self-sufficient by virtue of being self-revealing, artists could select prosaic and seemingly untransformed materials as sculpture, making their work appear fresh and direct. Their straightforwardness appeared to be on a par with the almost clinical, positivistic descriptions appearing in narratives by the New-Wave French writer and former agronomist Alain Robbe-Grillet, who similarly subjected his descriptions to off-frame allegorical structures such as the emotion jealousy in one of his most notable novels bearing this word as its title. This emphasis on the here and now in contemporary sculpture, which can also be viewed in terms of allegorical and/or structuralist terms, has taken many forms over the last half century. It can be found in the Merleau-Pontian phenomenological outlook central to Sue de Beer's furniture props that comfort viewers as they watch her gothic videos, the Kantian-inspired mathematical sublime inspired by Tara Donovan's use of ordinary materials like pencils and Scotch-tape multiplied into thousands of components, the objectification of individuality that serves as a basis for Ron Mueck's interplays between figures that appear as stirring presences before shrinking into the guise of mere objects, the reification of Tom Sachs's purposefully jerry-built bricolages with designer labels, and the metonyms giving rise to Marc Quinn's use of non-aestheticized materials like his own blood and feces, which refer back to the artist's putative presence and even more compelling absence.

These artists and the others interviewed in this book depend on their chosen materials—and not themselves—to refer to allegorical and/or structural meanings. Relying on a host of Eastern systems of belief to endow his materials with meaning, Wolfgang Laib regards his collected pollen, for example, as capable of healing without any spiritual overlay. He has stated, in almost a Zen fashion, "For me, the sky is much more important than trying to make a painting that is a symbol for the sky. For me, it's the pollen itself that is the miracle in which I participate in my daily life when I collect the pollen. It's not mine."

Similarly, Beverly Pepper invokes cast iron as her signature sculptural material. For Pepper, an American expatriate living in Italy and aware of the grand tradition of Etruscan iron sculpture, this material is commendable for its force and connotations of timelessness since it can remain buried in the soil for thousands of years without decomposing. Brought up in a family adhering to fundamentalist religious beliefs, Liza Lou plays on the contradictions of ersatz glass beads, which bring attention to dreary overlooked aspects of daily life such as "dust balls, dirty dishes, a closet full of cleaning equipment, a common backyard," thereby dramatizing the everyday at the same time she makes her highly artificial beaded objects—playing on a tacky form of transcendence—appear more real and even a little mundane.

While this book of conversations with sculptors contains remarkable insights into the ways that sculpture changed abruptly in the mid-20th century from being the "handmaiden to painting," according to Richard Serra, to becoming intimately involved with the physical world in many of its guises, this book is not intended to be a linear history of the period. It is a peripatetic and incisive journey of individual soundings, consisting of candid views playing off sustained analysis, deeply held values balancing momentary insights, and personality quirks dramatizing long-term emotional involvement. Some interviews are retrospective in their outlook, while others are involved with the challenges of specific works. And some are analytical and almost philosophical in their approach, while still others are intuitive. Although these exchanges can be read sequentially from beginning to end, they can also be considered spontaneously as one leafs through this volume and catches the flavor of first one exchange and then another. Perhaps, the most important contribution these discussions make to our overall understanding of contemporary sculpture is the extraordinary range of personalities involved in this endeavor. This book allows us sustained glimpses of a group of remarkable sculptors; at the same time, it helps to demystify recent art so that we can understand it as a route for thoughtful and sensitive individuals to communicate three-dimensionally through the semiotics of their materials their understanding of the present-day situation and its relevance for us all.

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