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Alice Aycock: The Machine That Makes The World

Alice Aycock
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RESOURCE SERIES

RESOURCE AND RESPONSE
SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

"There is a state of free fall where you don't know up, down, left, right, backwards or forwards; they're totally confused. Those seem to me to be the six ways of orienting yourself.
* * * What I would like to do is probably just disorient all those sensations. On the other hand, that also can be a very euphoric state; it can be very pleasing and people engage in all kinds of activities which involve this titillation (skydiving, amusement parks) . . . What are they all but ways of titillating yourself? They always have to do with whirling in space, for pleasure as much as for fear; you make yourself frightened so that you can enjoy it. For me things have that aspect."—Alice Aycock[1]

THE MACHINE THAT MAKES THE WORLD is a roughly constructed large wooden sculpture. In order to enter the sculpture, it is necessary to hoist into the air a series of metal doors which are located along three "avenues." The machine contains a wheel composed of three concentric rings which manually rotate one notch per hour. Over a long period of time, it is possible to enter the innermost ring.

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And there it is—the most direct way of describing that curious combination of fear and euphoria made immediately apparent in Alice Aycock's sculpture. Like a giant mousetrap, *The Machine That Makes The World* issues a direct challenge to those who enter—can you make your way through without getting caught? The answer is both yes and no. For unlike the breathless speed of a sky dive or roller coaster ride, *The Machine That Makes The World* operates very, very slowly. Infinite patience is required to negotiate the complex series of gates and concentric labyrinth. One must wait for each element to gradually reveal an opening to squeeze through.

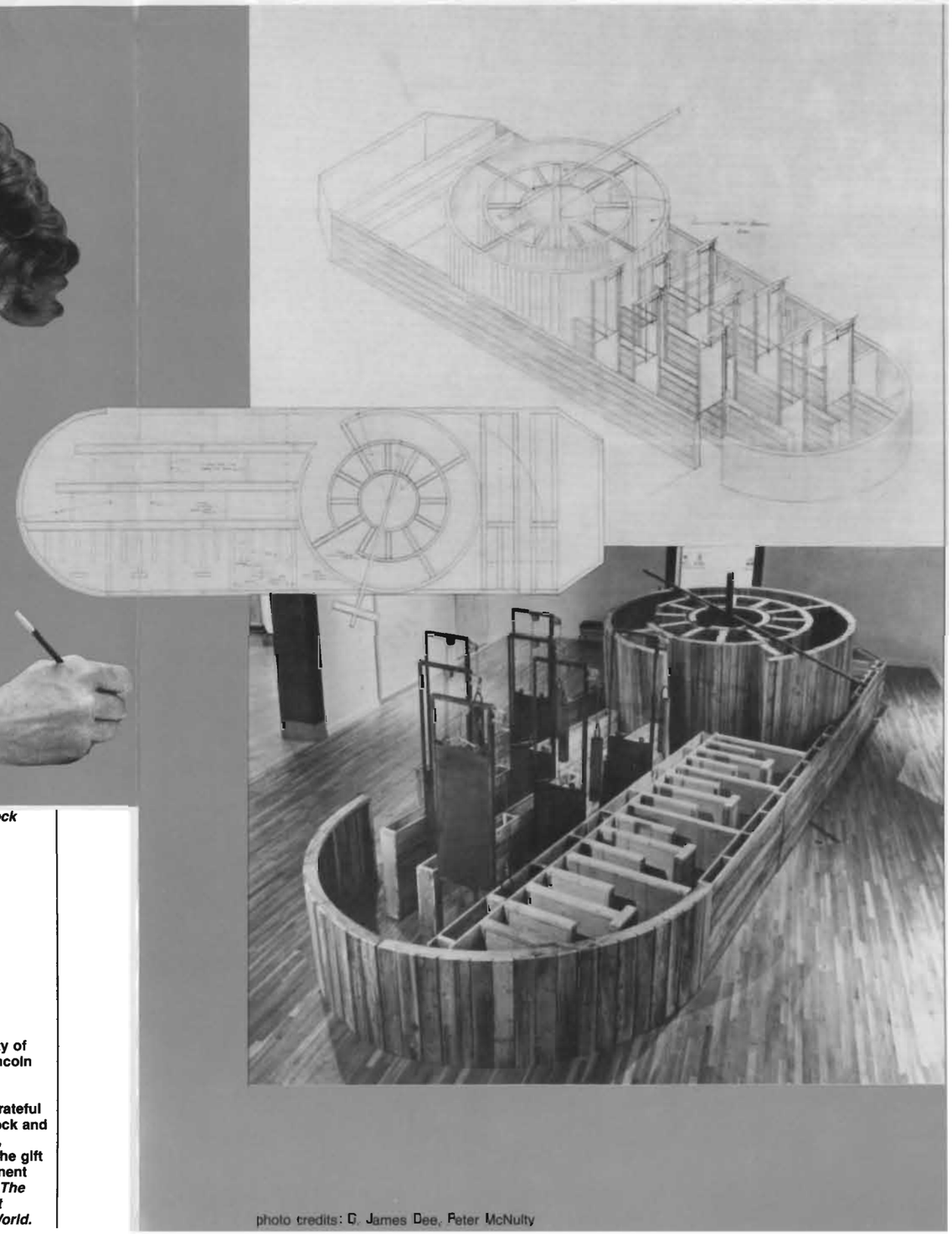
In labeling the piece, Aycock refers to "an amusement park, a lunatic asylum, a prison house, a market place, a battlefield, paradise" and adds, "—now they're really all the same thing, aren't they?" A complex notion indeed, but one that is very much in keeping with her confrontational manner of expression. Aycock's work is constantly evolving, with ideas flowing freely from one project to the next. Her imagery incorporates allusions to religion, history, personal dreams and conscious thought. In writing about her work, April Kingsley remarks, "No other artist I know of, even her onetime teacher Robert Morris, so consciously incorporates literary, historical and psychological references in her work as obsessively and consistently as Aycock does."[2]

Aycock's interest in creating architectural constructions began early. Her father was a construction engineer, and from a young age Aycock was cognizant of the concept of "structure" in the physical sense and its contituent elements. While a graduate student, she spent time in Greece and Turkey accompanied by a copy of Vincent Scully's *The Earth, The Temple and The Gods.* A seminal work in the history of architecture, Scully's book sets forth the sacred architecture of the ancient Greeks as being interdependent with their religious iconography and the landscape itself. It made a particular impression on Aycock as she visited ancient ruins. She found the pervasive use of the circle in tholos tombs and labyrinth foundations compelling, and the circle would later appear as a motif frequently in her work. Aycock says of this traveling experience, "I was very drawn to these buildings, but at the time I could not reconcile their fixed state and the necessity to return to construction with my interests in causality, transitory events, and self-sustaining systems."[3]

Her chance to reconcile her actual constructions with her philosophical interests came when she was researching material for a master's thesis for Hunter College. In writing her thesis which was concerned with the structure of highway systems, she developed ways of applying the idea of "structure" to various levels of meaning and context. She incorporated the theories and philosophies of such diverse intellects as the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, and the literary critic Morse Peckham. From each, she found that "structures" can be used to have such various intents as an application of a necessary social structure relationship to a contingent avent (Lévi-Strauss), or as being a set of directions for a performance (Peckham) or as being the structure of conscious thought in terms of behavior (Piaget).[4]

In describing the works which immediately followed her thesis she relates, "The structures, i.e. spaces and materials of construction, act upon the perceiver at the same time as the perceiver acts on or with the structures. The spaces are psychophysical spaces. The works are set up as exploratory situations for the perceiver. They can be known only by moving one's body through them. They involve experiential time and memory . . . A friend recently pointed out that I seem to relate everything to everything else."[5]

Alice Aycock



THE MACHINE THAT MAKES THE WORLD 1979, pencil on vellum, 62' x 62', Collection of The Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A.

THE MACHINE THAT MAKES THE WORLD 1979, wood and steel, 96" x 145½" x 456", University Collection, Gift of the Artist and Klein Gallery, Chicago

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln and Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery are grateful to Alice Aycock and Klein Gallery, Chicago for the gift to the permanent collection of *The Machine That Makes The World.*

photo credits: D. James Dee, Peter McNulty

Her early works were generally static environmental constructions incorporating earth and wood. Two examples dating from 1972 to 1973 respectively are *Maze* and *Low Building with Dirt Roof*—essentially simple, straightforward structures that are adequately described by their titles. Her more recent works, designed primarily for interior spaces, still exude the underlying philosophy she set forth in the early 1970s. Aycock has maintained the same scale and use of wood, although the structures themselves have become increasingly complex, involving mechanical devices and more than one major component. By juxtaposing the actual components of sculpture with the physical and mental participation of the viewer, she has created a mode of expression that seems without precident in contemporary sculpture.

Aycock's work, so jammed with ideas, allusions, and opportunities for free association, seems to be in direct opposition to the Minimalist style that dominated sculpture in the 1960s. Eliminating all reference to content, Minimalism relies on the close examination and interpretation of the essential building blocks of art structure. Analytical and tightly calculated, Minimalism also forces the viewer to contemplate the object as an entity—existing only for itself.

With the advent of Conceptualism in the 1970s, a form of expression based on ideas, the components that make "art"—line, shape, color, form and texture—recede in importance, and, in the case of performance art, become virtually nonexistant. In dealing with ideas as a primary source for her work, Aycock's constructions have a certain relationship with Conceptualism, although her richly varied structural components, intricate and often whimsical in nature, are part of an older tradition going back to the Futurists' fascination with speed and motion, and to Marcel Duchamp's *Chocolate Grinder* of 1914. From this point, the imagery of the machine or its individual components has appeared again and again in 20th century art in the guise as savior or villian of contemporary society. But Aycock's imagery falls exclusively in neither camp.

The Machine That Makes The World aludes to technology by providing a "machine"—a giant turning device that gathers knowledge or information[6]—but at the same time is a relatively crude, simple structure made of crating wood that recalls a more ancient, pre-industrial past. The steel mechanical elements of her construction seem to exist in harmony with her wooden maze and walls. They serve as reference points to an ongoing drama of events that range as far the individual imagination will take them.

Suzanne T. Wise

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Footnotes

1. Stuart Morgan and Alice Aycock, "Alice Aycock: 'A Certain Image of Something I Like Very Much,' " *Arts Magazine* 52(March 1978):118
2. April Kingsley, "Six Women at Work in the Landscape," *Arts Magazine* 52(April 1978):109
3. Alice Aycock, "Work 1972-1974," from Alan Sondheim, ed., *Individuals: Post Movement Art in America* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1977) p. 104
4. ibid p. 105
5. ibid p. 105
6. conversation with the artist, August 14, 1985

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