Donna Dennis

Re-Imagining an American Vernacular

By Jan Riley

As the newly appointed assistant curator at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati in 1987, one of my first assignments was to write the wall texts for "Standing Ground: Sculpture by American Women." Donna Dennis was one of the fifty artists included in the exhibition. When her *Skowhegan Stairway* (1982–83; Fig. 1) arrived at the gallery, it looked like a demolished shed. There were no directions for its assembly, and it took our entire crew to install it. As our preparator cursed the day "some idiot gave this woman a saw and the idea that she could build anything," I charged him to find someone with traditional skills who could build something so beautiful. He asked me to remind him about that when it fell on me. *Skowhegan Stairway* never fell, and I visited it every day. I would sit against the wall opposite the piece, listen to the crickets that sounded from its hidden tape player, and be glad that Dennis had had the courage to build it.

Donna Dennis was born in 1942 in her maternal grandparents' house in Springfield, Ohio, the eldest of four girls. She attended public schools there and in Washington, D.C., until her family moved to Rye, New York, in 1949. Dennis's parents and grandparents were Scots Irish Protestant, and in their home there was no drinking, smoking, or card playing, and Sundays were devoted to reading: the Bible, John Milton's "Paradise Lost" (which Dennis remembers, "luckily was illustrated by Gustave Doré"), or *National Geographic* articles about missionaries.

As a child, Dennis loved to draw and was naturally inventive. In the first grade, she remembers drawing a house, cropped so that half of it was "invisible." When her teacher objected, telling her, "You can't draw half a house," Dennis felt both disdain and "a kind of pity" for her teacher. Of course she could draw half a house. Why not? Dennis found her first mentor in her high school art teacher, Mabel D'Amico, whose husband, Victor, had founded the Art Education program at MoMA, and who herself made Cornell-style boxes. (The D'Amicos had a summer place in Amagansett and knew Jackson Pollock.) With D'Amico's encouragement, Dennis created sets for several student productions and was recognized in her senior yearbook as "our poet and artist." Dennis's parents opposed their daughter's career choice, warning her that "if you persist in being an artist you will die lonely and poor." They also believed it was "a selfish life," asking "What are you going to do to make the world a better place?"

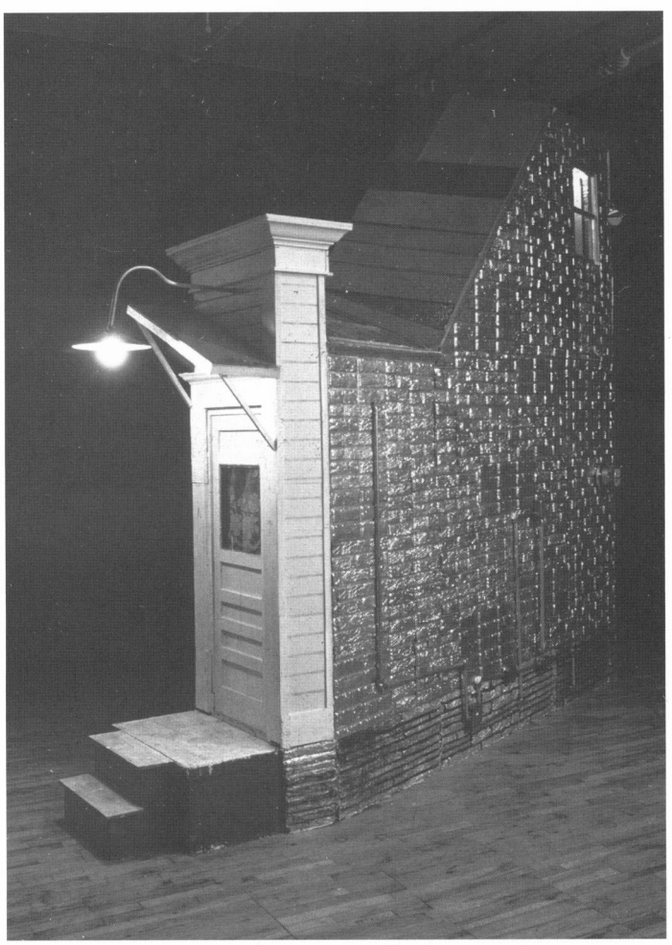

Fig. 1. Donna Dennis, *Skowhegan Stairway* (1982–83), various materials, with sound, 138" x 140" x 37". Photo: D. James Dee

At Carleton College in Minnesota, the arts program run by a Scottish Social Realist painter felt discouraging and frustrating to Dennis. Finally, however, during her senior year, the requirement of creating a senior thesis painting based on either Shakespeare or the Bible was lifted. The painting Dennis created, of a tree with raised branches, signaled her feeling of freedom.

Dennis's grandfather, who had invested money for her education, died just as she was entering college. As she was finishing her undergraduate degree, Dennis saw an

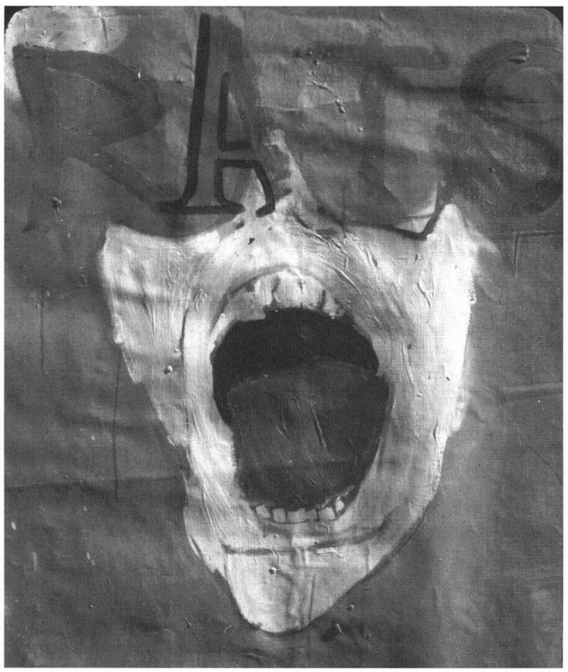

Fig. 2. Donna Dennis, *Rats* (1965), acrylic on canvas, 39" x 32".

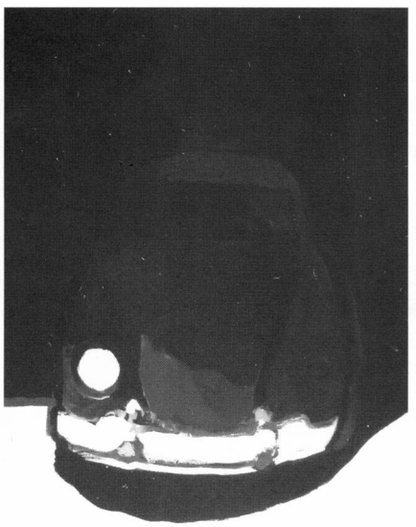

Fig. 3. Donna Dennis, Untitled (1967), acrylic on canvas, 50"x 38".

announcement for Roger Barr's program at the American Center in Paris, and rather than go to graduate school, she used the rest of her college money to join her classmate, the painter Martha Diamond, in heading for Paris. Dennis was painting abstractions but felt that she "never knew when a painting was finished." Barr told her, "Never do something just because you *think* you should do it." Out of frustration, from her imagination, she made a painting of a big, ugly, fat prostitute. She knew exactly when it was finished, and it felt right. Barr liked it, too. Dennis began a series of "ugly women" that ended with a self-portrait titled *Rats* (1965; Fig. 2) in which she depicted herself screaming (with a green tongue) and the word RATS scrawled in red across her face. Finally, it felt like she knew what she was doing.

When she returned to the United States, she moved to New York City, where she worked as a secretary at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the fundraising department. At night, she studied painting with Stephen Greene at the Art Students League, doing figurative pieces. Peter Schjeldahl, a classmate at Carleton who also was in Paris the previous year, introduced her to his circle of friends in the Poetry Project at Saint Mark's Church. Among them was Ted Berrigan, soon to become an art critic for the *Village Voice*, whom she later came to think of as her mentor.

In Paris, Dennis had loved wandering among the old buildings. The city still carried the damage from World War II, with layers of building and re-building, including old and new paint, clearly visible. Back in New York, Dennis started looking at black-and-white photography: Jacques Henri Lartigue, Eugene Atget, Berenice Abbott, and Walker Evans were favorites.

She recalled a visit to Boston when she was seven or eight, and seeing the Old North Church, where Paul Revere had hung his lantern. "I felt sorry for it," she said, because it was in a bad neighborhood and appeared neglected and abandoned. She began painting in black and white, enlivening the starkness by mixing colors into the blacks and whites and then placing a white against its contrasting black, so they would vibrate together. The last paintings she did were of cars. "I realized that the cars were me, were self-portraits," she said, "and when I made the last painting showing a car driving straight at you [1967; Fig. 3], I knew I was ready to get off the canvas and into the room. I wanted to knock people's socks off and didn't think I knew how to do it with painting."

Dennis left the Art Students League and rented a studio with Martha Diamond, "a real loft," with enough space to work on a large scale. In late 1966 or early 1967, Dennis made a ten-foot-tall painting that consisted of a purple sky with long horizontal clouds moving across the top and a gray triangular shape at the bottom. In front of the painting, on the floor, she placed a Plexiglas® box, its interior sprayed lavender to match the sky. A silver pipe, bent at a right angle, crossed the interior of the box, and a dark plastic "puddle" spread out on the floor in front of it. Dennis imagined that "the clouds would be able to drain down, through the dark funnel into the box, and by way of the pipe, out onto the floor in front." As a final touch, she placed a square mirror, the size and shape of the box, directly behind it on the surface of the painting. The mirror caught the image of the box, reflecting it, so that, "if the box got scared being out on the floor by itself, it could climb back into the painting." When Berrigan (whom she was dating) saw this large new work, he laughed and teased Dennis, pointing out what "box" meant in slang and how the box related to the triangular shape behind it and the long horizontal clouds in the sky. Dennis was a little embarrassed, but also delighted, and never again doubted her ability to use her intuition to reveal her interior life.

For her next work, *Wall #1 for Imaginary Landscape* (1968; Fig. 4), she divided a large canvas vertically into three identical parts—like film stills. In each part, beneath a cut-off fragment of a pyramid was a vertical brick "wall" created by wallpaper patterned with photographed bricks. Running up the center of each wall was a slit-thin mirror, suggesting a narrow opening. At the bottom was a square black-and-white photographic close-up of a cloud formation. Dennis thought of the mirrors as not only entrances but also shafts of light connecting the pyramids, with clouds buried in chambers below. The thin pieces of mirror rewarded the viewer moving around the piece by shifting and reflecting light. The mirrors also represented three places: the surface, the reflection, and the space behind the mirror. She was

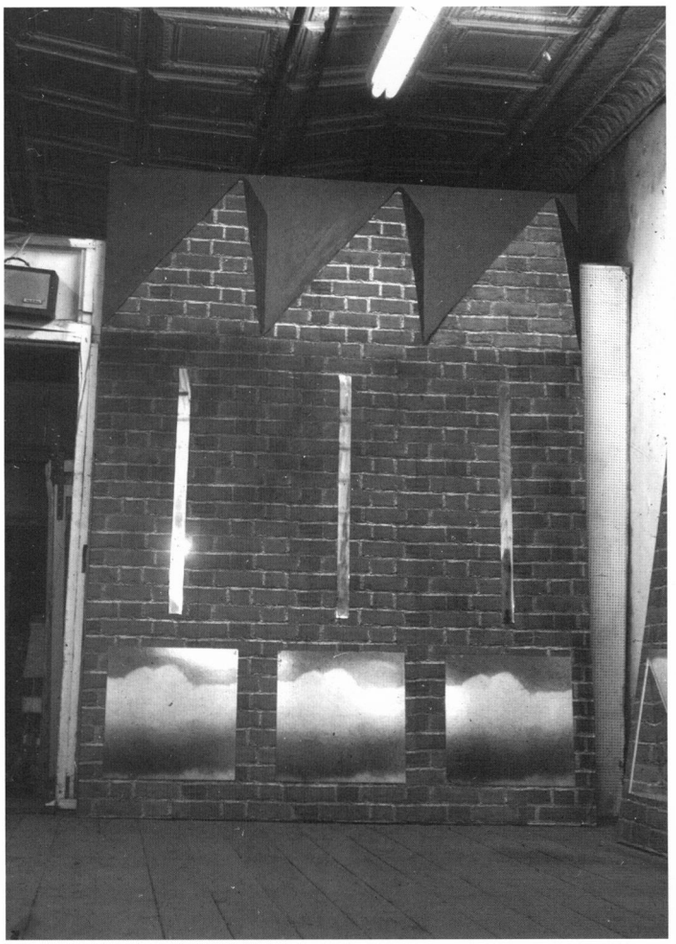

Fig. 4. Donna Dennis, *Wall #1 for Imaginary Landscape* (1968), acrylic, wallpaper, mirror, mounted photo on canvas, 120" x 84".

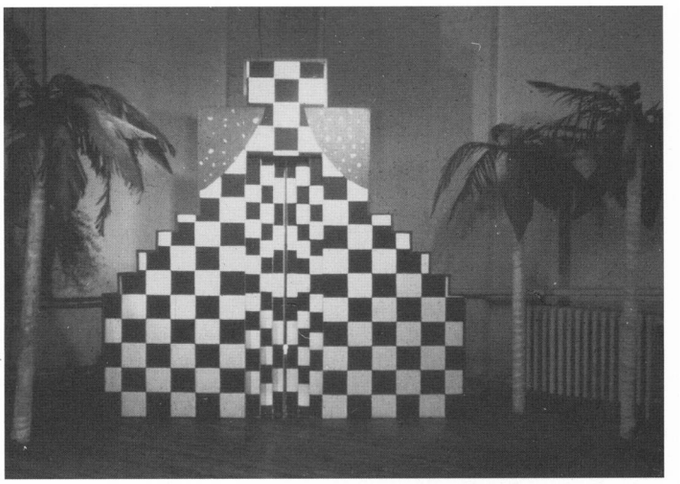

Fig. 5. Donna Dennis, *False Front in Jungle Setting* (1972), acrylic on canvas, wood, mirror, cheesecloth, 80" x 75".

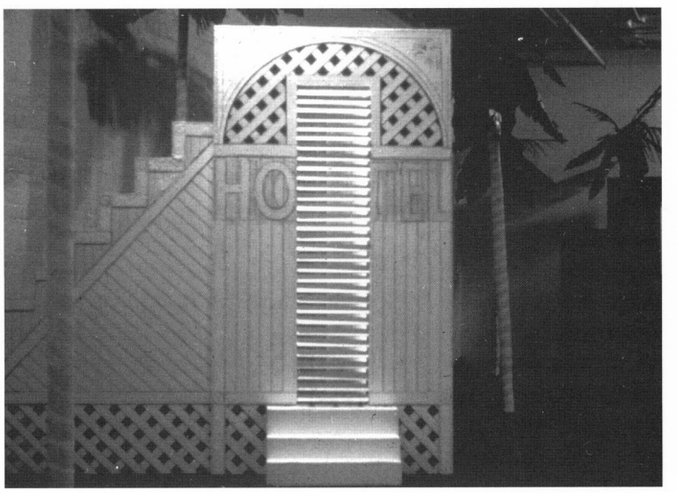

Fig. 6. Donna Dennis, *Hotel Pacifica* (1972), graphite and acrylic on Masonite®, wood, mirror, fluorescent light, sandbag, 68 1/2" x 70" x 18".

trying to make a false entrance, or allude to a hidden space. "You couldn't see in, you couldn't get in, but there was the suggestion that there was more to see, more to find."

The early 1970s were a time of turmoil and growth for Dennis. She and Berrigan broke up, and she moved out of the shared loft into her own studio. She also realized that she missed painting, and "having her hand in" her work. She returned to making little collages with paint as a way to ground and renew herself and find her way forward. She started keeping journals and consciously gave herself permission to let her ideas flow uncensored, struggling to find her way back to the ease she knew as a child when creating something. Riding the bus one day, she saw workers digging a hole and remembered one of her favorite childhood activities: making shelters. She recalled making tree houses, making houses out of boxes and even out of raked leaves. Especially inspiring was a snapshot of her mother as a child standing at the door of an igloo made by her uncle after an Ohio snowstorm.

She got out her childhood blocks and when she went to see the Tomb of Perneb at the Metropolitan Museum, was strongly drawn to that mastaba. She saw that the architecture of the structure led to an entryway, which led to a corridor, which in turn led to a false door. Now employed by *Encyclopedia Americana* as a picture researcher, with access to images from many cultures, Dennis recognized the false door as a type of spirit door separating the worlds of the living and the dead. The only way to get through the door was via one's imagination.

Dennis's journal pages from that time show the black-and-white checkerboard pattern from her childhood Mother Goose book, patterns from her bathroom tiles, the book jacket of Carlos Castaneda's *A Separate Reality* (1971), narrow doors, false fronts, ziggurats, palm trees. She studied Joseph Cornell, especially his "hotel" works. Riding the bus to work, she noticed entrances to the seedy Bowery hotels that were shallow, tiled hallways with stairs going straight up from the street, and began a series of drawings of imaginary, false-front hotels with narrow openings and checkerboard facades. She decided to build one, thinking of it as a shaped canvas, which meant learning carpentry. At first, her lack of skill was frustrating, but she persevered and worked out a number of things that she has kept with her, including the scale of the piece.

Fig. 7. Donna Dennis, "Hotels" at West Broadway Gallery (1973), l. to r., *Hotel Pacifica, Egyptian Hotel, Bird Hotel, Dark Hotel,* installation with light and sound.

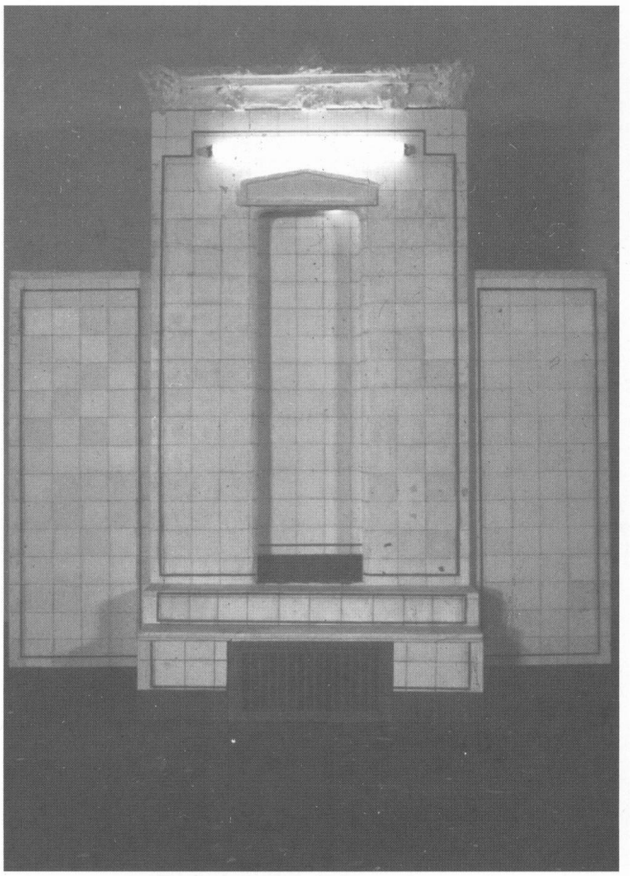

Fig. 8. Donna Dennis, *Station Hotel* (1973–74), various materials, 75" x 72" x 13 1/2".

For *False Front in Jungle Setting* (1972; Fig. 5), Dennis built four layers of stretchers for shaped canvases to create a facade and a stepped-back opening for a mirror. It brought her back into painting, and while it included imagery from her earlier work (checkerboard patterning, the mastaba shape, and a false entrance), it added new influences. The complex stage sets for Robert Wilson's *Deafman Glance* (1971) and Ed Ruscha's artist's book, *A Few Palm Trees* (1971) inspired her to create palm trees and stand them next to *False Front* to create a small environment.

The women's movement was just beginning, and one of Dennis's responses was to question why she was making ten-foot canvases, realizing that scale was her way of "trying to emulate the men." Before adding the rectangle on top, *False Front in Jungle Setting* was around her height, 5 feet, 8-1/2 inches, and almost every piece she has made since then is based on that measurement. Dennis also recognized that: "So much has been lost to the world in dismissing the gifts of, and the voices of, women. I wanted to be a part of discovering and bringing that voice to the fore and making sure it would never again be lost or silenced.... My work is a lot about getting people to find beauty in places they might have overlooked or dismissed, just as women's lives have been overlooked and dismissed." With that commitment, she would overcome her parents' objections to her becoming an artist: She would not have a selfish life, but rather would work to make the world a better place—by discovering her own, unique female voice, letting it be heard, and unearthing and listening to the voices of other women. She discovered that, as young women, both her grandmother and mother had painted briefly. She read as many books by women as she could, and found Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* deeply moving. It was 1972, and Dennis was about to turn thirty.

From Minimalism, which was everywhere, she got the idea of "rewarding" the viewer for moving around her new piece, *Egyptian Hotel* (1972; Pl. 1), where the colors of the layered step-backs surrounding the mirror were only visible if viewers changed their point of view. With *Egyptian Hotel*, she was "thumbing my nose at Minimalism" (and taking a certain pleasure in it), by creating a recognizable object and decorating it. She was not interested in the austerity that was part of the Minimalists' credo, as presented by its male practitioners.

The next group of works Dennis embarked upon owed much to her reading of *Two Serious Ladies* by Jane Bowles. Published in 1943 (Bowles's only novel), it became a modernist cult classic. In it, the two female characters, Christina Goering and Frieda Copperfield, abandon their families and their places in society. Mrs. Copperfield, accompanying her husband on a cruise to Panama, falls in love with a female prostitute and is swallowed up by the world of bars and bordellos. *Hotel Pacifica* (1972; Fig. 6), named for the prostitute, recreates the front of a seedy tropical hotel, lit from behind by a fluorescent light, with trompe l'oeil wooden siding and a louvered door. It was the first time Dennis had used an electric light and she taught herself how to do electrical wiring. (The idea of the fluorescent light came from Dan Flavin's work, she said.)

With *Hotel Pacifica* and the other hotels that would follow—*Egyptian Hotel, Bird Hotel* (1973) and *Dark Hotel* (1973)—Dennis was developing the idea that she (and all women) needed to build their own interior spaces and lives. Lisa Lyons, writing in the catalog for the Walker Art Center's 1977 exhibition, "Scale and Environment: Ten Sculptors," noted that, "Dennis, a feminist, ... views the hotel as a metaphor for a personal, introspective journey."[1]

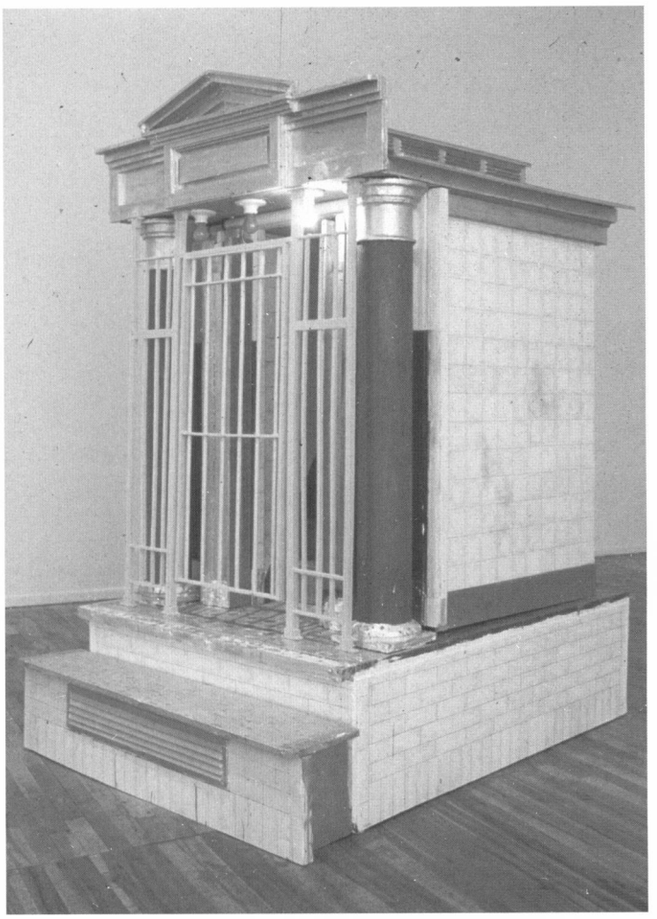

Fig. 9. Donna Dennis, *Subway with Yellow and Blue* (1975), various materials, 79" x 49" x 65 1/2". Collection Neue Galerie-Sammlung Ludwig, Aachen, Germany. Photo: Bevan Davies.

Dennis was creating human-scale environments with lights and sounds, unlike the more austere, silent Minimalist pieces, deliberately purged of metaphor and self-expression. She recognized these "shrines or temples" were her version of "women's houses": celebrating the power of women just as traditional native men's houses encapsulated male domination and societal influence. As Richard Marshall wrote in the catalog for the Whitney Museum's 1981 exhibition "Developments in Recent Sculpture,"

> In the early 1970s, Dennis decided to break with Minimalist and Conceptualist work and turn toward a more personal direction and subject matter. This shift coincided with her involvement in the feminist movement and her desire to make work that related to her life, but was at the same time concerned with color, craft and surface texture.[2]

Many women artists at the time were investigating forms of art-making that were considered to be "feminine" such as including sewing and weaving, or using forms such as circles and ovals, and colors like pinks and pastel shades. Their investigations and imagery generally ran counter to the established art world that was firmly centered on Minimalism.

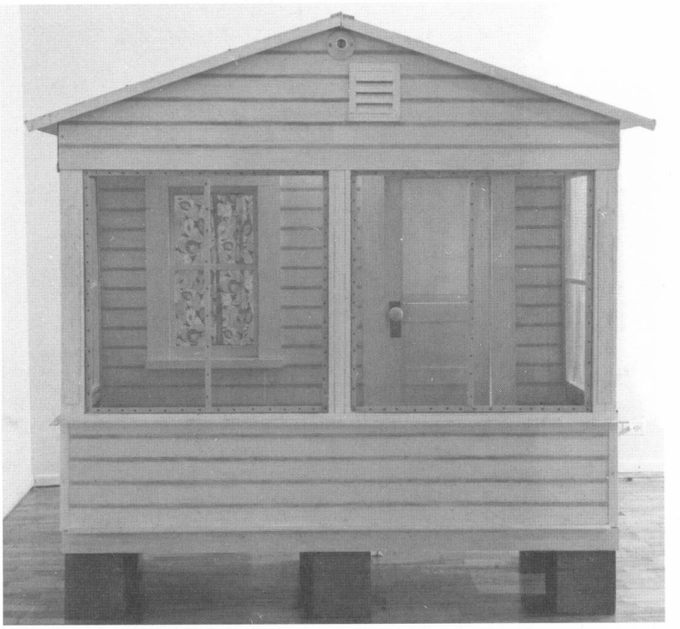

Fig. 10. Donna Dennis, *Tourist Cabin Porch (Maine)* (1976), various materials, 78 1/2" x 82" x 26 1/2". Collection Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. Photo: Bevan Davies.

Dennis and her friend Denise Green (with the help of the painter Joan Snyder), began their own consciousness-raising group, centered on the girlfriends and wives of poets they knew. The group process of working out issues such as familial relationships was illuminating for Dennis, although her imagery remained more personal, not heavily influenced by feminist symbols and theory.

In the spring of 1973, Dennis's first one-person exhibition, "Hotels," opened at the co-op West Broadway Gallery (Fig. 7). She showed four Hotels in a cohesive environment that included the recorded sounds of jungle birds and theatrical lighting. Gerrit Henry, writing in *Art News*, called "Hotels" "an unadulterated poetic experience, a profoundly charming dreamland that had the imaginative authenticity of its allusions."[3] She thought she would be doing hotels forever. But when she moved into a new studio on Duane Street (where she still works), she suddenly felt lost: "I couldn't do the hotels anymore."

While waiting for the subway one day, she noticed a doorway on the opposite platform that opened onto a tiled wall. The contrast between the warm incandescent light inside the doorway and the cool fluorescent light around it was arresting. She crossed over to investigate. The doorway, above which she now saw the word "Women" written in mosaic tiles, led to a short hall that contained two more doors. Dennis was elated; she had found a new subject. She started a new series of hotel drawings now incorporating things she saw in the subway stations and in her new neighborhood: open doors, stairs and stairwells, louvered vents for basement spaces, and lights glowing through glass circles set in sidewalks.

Station Hotel (1973–74; Fig. 8), which echoed that subway door, would be Dennis's last false-front hotel. She used two

Fig. 11. Donna Dennis, *Deep Station* (1981–85), various materials, 144" x 240" x 288". Photo: Peter Mauss/ESTO.

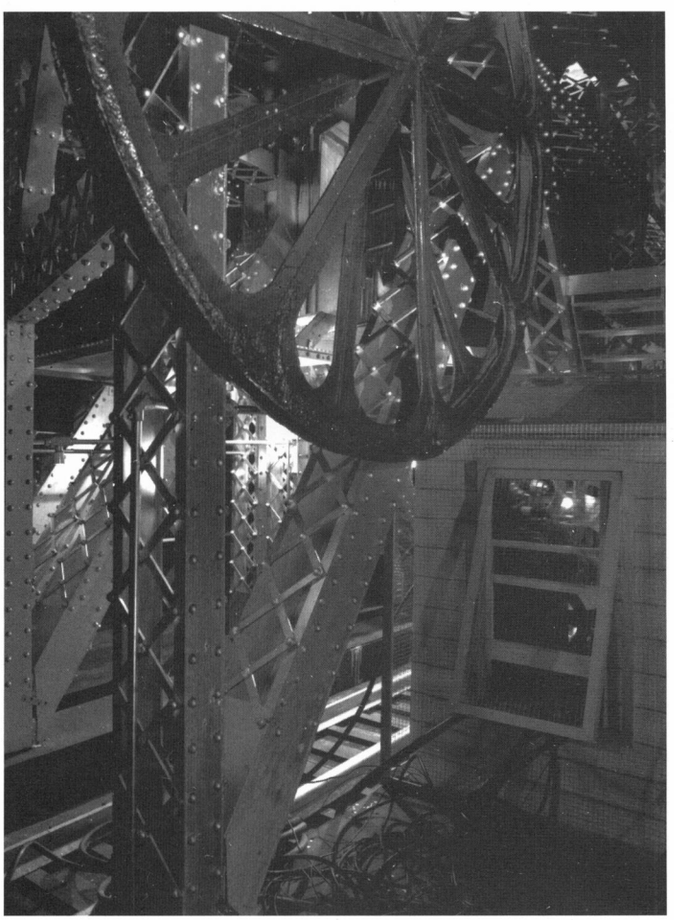

Fig. 12. Donna Dennis, *BLUE BRIDGE/red shift (In memory of Helen Hogue Dennis)* (1991–93), various materials, 144" x 168" x 288". Photo: Peter Mauss/ESTO.

different color lights: a fluorescent tube directly over the door and an incandescent light inside. She submitted it for and won a New York Creative Artists Public Service (CAPS) grant—in the category of painting. Continuing to look at subway stations, Dennis became intrigued by the columns and rivets. She wanted to build in the round. For the first time, she built a model to help her visualize and build the finished piece: *Subway with Lighted Interior* (1974), a small freestanding building. The drawn and painted tiled-brick front carries four riveted columns flanking a narrow entrance into a tiled interior lit by a hidden incandescent light. The building stands at the top of three steps. The louvered grid of an industrial industrial vent, meant to bring light and air into an implied underground tunnel, pierces the lower step. Even more complete as a structure is *Subway with Yellow and Blue* (1975; Fig. 9), about which Dennis wrote:

> I began with the idea of making a stairway that went up in the front but was blocked off at the top, and, on the same diagonal, a stairway that went down in the back and seemed to go somewhere. As I worked on the piece I became aware that it bore a resemblance to small mausoleums, especially those I saw in a cemetery in New Orleans. I began to think of it as a dream house, with a basement, hidden passageways, secret rooms, and a subterranean life. The feeling grew in me that what I was making was the small, visible surfacing of something vast, hidden, unknown, and perhaps powerful.[4]

The complexity of the structure also challenged Dennis's carpentry abilities. She wanted to make round columns but found some hollow metal tubes on Canal Street that she was able to cover and paint. "I always thought I needed to figure out [carpentry and building techniques] for myself and by myself," she says.

In the mid-1970s, remembering family summer road trips, Dennis headed to Maine. She photographed tourist cabins and used her photographs along with some by Walker Evans as the source material for a new group of works. *Tourist Cabin Porch (Maine)* (1976; Fig.10) is a small cabin with a peaked roof, wooden siding, and a screened-in porch. Visible through the screen are a door into the house and a window curtained with flowered fabric. The porch light illuminates the tiny space. That there is no cabin for the door to open into is not immediately noticeable. What is seen, and felt, is the time of day (early evening) and the long summer days of a season that is too brief. Deborah Everett wrote that the work:

> recalls a time before the average American could afford hotel stays. Dennis has remarked that the piece's origin lies in her childhood memories of family vacations and the small houses that were rented out to tourists as more Americans took to the road.... During this period, Dennis

was intensely moved by Walker Evans's roadside photographs of clapboard buildings in the country's heartland.... Deceptively simple and unaffected, it embodies the classic qualities of the American disposition—a forthrightness linked to the common man, a sense of working-class practicality and abstention, and a solidity connoting strength and self-reliance.. . .The cabin's pared-down style connotes pragmatism and frugality and refutes quality of life issues; stripped of decoration and comforts, it is a modern-day descendant of America's roots in Puritanism.[5]

As Dennis was making her hotels, Holly Solomon was becoming well-known as an art collector. (In 1969, Solomon and her husband, Horace, had opened their 98 Greene Street Loft, one of the first alternative spaces in New York, and though it lasted just three years, they gave early exposure to such talents as Laurie Anderson, Robert Mapplethorpe, Robert Kushner and Gordon Matta-Clark.) Denise Green brought the Solomons to Dennis's studio when they were looking for a piece for their home. Solomon was quietly getting ready to make the controversial leap from private collector to gallerist, and one Sunday evening, as Dennis was hosting a figure-drawing session for artist friends, the phone rang, and Solomon told her, "Donna, I'm starting a gallery and I want you to be in it."

In 1975, the Holly Solomon Gallery opened at 392 West Broadway in Soho. The following year Dennis debuted "Tourist Cabins and Subway Stations" there. She envisioned her exhibition as an installation, complete with lighting and recorded sounds, and arranged the four structures so they forced the viewer to move through the space. Although Solomon was distressed that viewers would not be able to see all of the works from one vantage point, and that she couldn't see them all from her desk, she didn't require Dennis to make changes. With this exposure, Dennis's work became more widely known. She exhibited at the Walker Art Center in 1977, and in 1979, she was included in the Whitney Biennial as well as in Washington, D.C., in the Hirshhorn's "Directions" exhibition.

Two Stories with Porch (for Robert Cobuzio) (1977–79; Pl. 2) had two specific sources as described by Dennis:

> one, a small building, probably built as a toll booth, which stood at the entrance to the Holland Tunnel, the other, a bay-windowed row house in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, photographed by George Tice.[6] In each structure I liked the way you could look up and into a window, across an interior space, and out again through another window. In the course of the two years I spent making *Two Stories with Porch*, a close friend [Cobuzio], an artist who had grown up in New Jersey, died ... the work came to be ... about our friendship, severed, and a tribute to him, and (my) decisions about many of the details were guided by this. The room on the second floor with a light is meant as a resting place for him and the house's appearance as a building under renovation as a symbol of rebirth.[7]

Two Stories with Porch was included in the 1979 Whitney Biennial.

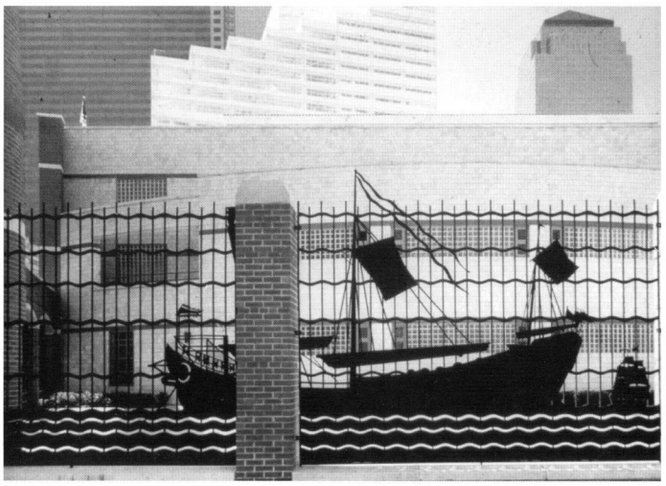

Fig. 13. Donna Dennis, *Dreaming of Faraway Places: The Ships Come to Washington Market* (1988), cut and welded steel, hand-glazed ceramic medallions, 14 panels, each 120" x 168". Collection Board of Education of the City of New York. Photo: Jeff Goldberg/ESTO.

Tunnel Tower (1979–80; Pl. 3) also was inspired by the Holland Tunnel, in this case the scaffolding on the tunnel building. "My problem was how to make a one-story structure feel like a tower: tower as secret space, as signal-sender, as look-out, as dungeon." (Again, a photograph by Tice, this time, *White Castle, Route #1, Rahway, New Jersey* [1973], provided the answer.) Dennis's 1980 exhibition at Holly Solomon's, titled "New York and New Jersey," included both *Tunnel Tower* and *Two Stories with Porch.* This was the first time Dennis asked for the gallery walls be painted a dark gray, something she has required of every exhibition space since. Little red lights blinked on and off (the unexpected result of the rewiring of Christmas lights) above the neon in the scaffolding of *Tunnel Tower.* She wrote, "I saw the scaffolding as rising up out of the fortress and its electricity as a fragile and complex nervous system...its appearance marked a public celebration of private fantasy and feelings."[8]

The following year, Dennis used a version of *Tunnel Tower* in her first site-specific outdoor piece, *Mad River Tunnel: Entrance and Exit,* created for the City Beautiful program in Dayton, Ohio. Given only two weeks to complete the piece, she made it using "real materials": concrete blocks, tiles, etc. It was sited on two sides of the Mad River (there was no actual tunnel): the "entrance" was at Deed's Point and the "exit" on the opposite bank. (Vandals almost immediately destroyed the piece, and all that remains is a photograph.)

For the 1982 Venice Biennale, Solomon wanted Dennis to show a work she had begun only months before. Solomon hired a crew to help Dennis complete *Subway with Silver Girders* (1981–82) in time, also enabling her to advance her work in directions she had only dreamed of. Dennis wrote:

> I thought of the platform as being public and male, and the track as being private and female.... I saw the track as a ... flowing river ... full of life and un-harnessed potential, ... underestimated and possibly dangerous....

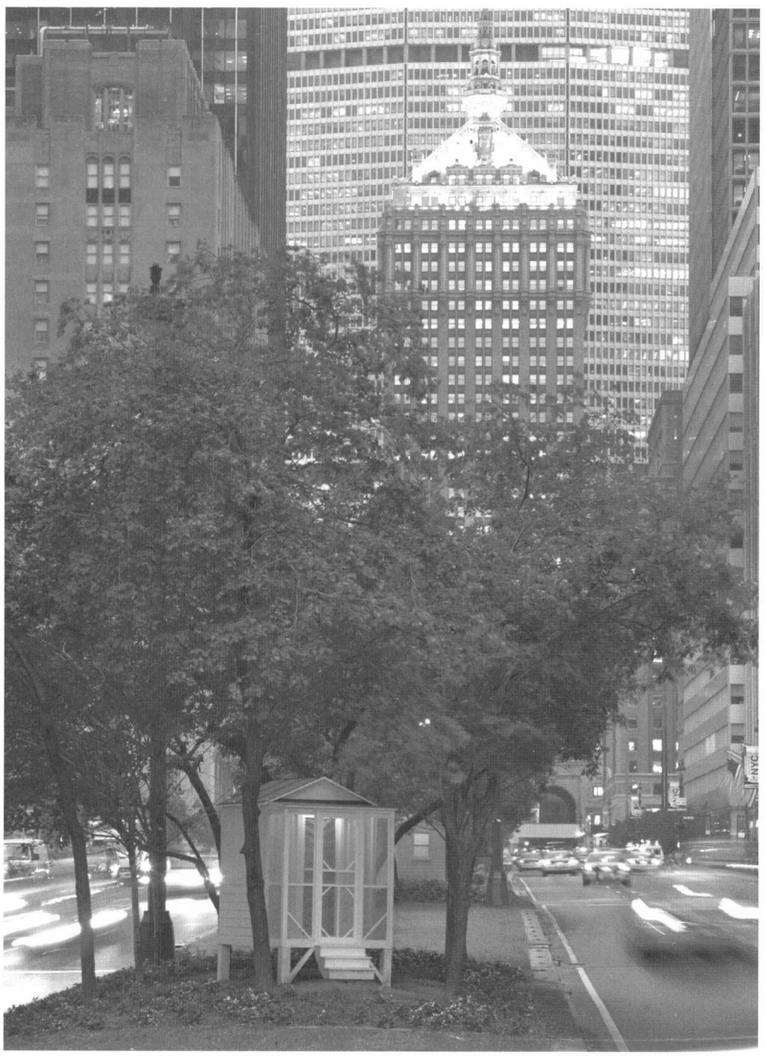

Fig. 14. Donna Dennis, *Tourist Cabins on Park Avenue* (2007), various materials, two cabins, each 78" x 52 1/4" x 72". Median between 52nd and 53rd Streets, New York City.

> The station, with its platform and tower, is the City of Night on the edge of the river. This city, which appears at first to be ordered and rational, is on closer inspection found to be locked, congested, full of obstacles, and in the end nightmarish and irrational.[9]

Dennis felt that in this piece she had been able to use all the things she had learned up to this point: "All the lights were turned on."

At the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, where Dennis taught during the summer of 1982, she was inspired by "a covered stairway that went up the side of a two-story frame building…. What attracted me was the windowed landing at the top and the oddly slanted roof, made of pieced-together metal sheeting. I imagined taking the stairs away from the structure … so that they would stand on their own as a self-sufficient … sliver of a building." *Skowhegan Stairway* (Fig.1) "became my escape route, my private entrance to the heavens. One side became bright, reflective silver brick and the other side, sealed up when the building was removed, a black and tarry scar."[10]

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Dennis showed her work nationally and internationally, including at the Tate Gallery in London and the Ludwig Forum fur Internationale Kunst, in Aachen, Germany. In 1984, after installing *Skowhegan Stairway* in the Venice Biennale, Dennis stopped in Rome, where she was struck by the ongoing excavation and how parts of the Forum were still buried and awaiting discovery. The sight helped her finish *Deep Station* (1981-85; Fig. 11 and Pl. 4). Her last subway work, "*Deep Station* is meant to be the subway station at the bottom of the world … hence all the columns and rivets holding up enormous weight. I think of the track area as a kind of subterranean river and the platform as an ancient city on the banks of that river."[11]

Carey Lovelace wrote in *Arts Magazine* that

> [T]he piece can be seen as an elaboration in space of the places of the self: the hidden passageways to which one is refused entrance, lights that provide places of clarity, or offer forth areas that are "presentable." The I-beams themselves point to subjectivity, while the tower with its electric clock is a place of control and surveillance—the mind and heart together. It is the tower, with its illuminated windows, that provides the place of most intimacy.[12]

Drawbridges with little houses nesting within their structures also attracted Dennis, and with the help of the painter Rackstraw Downes, she got permission to get up on a rail drawbridge over the Hackensack River in New Jersey. Dennis climbed all over, taking photographs, and was invited into one of the bridge tender's houses to look at it closely. While she was making *BLUE BRIDGE/red shift* (1991–93; Fig. 12 and Pl. 5), Dennis's mother died, and she put much of her sorrow and feelings of loss into this piece. Their relationship had been loving, but complicated. Dennis came to see herself as the little green house along the track with all the dials and lights—the controller—and her mother as the house over the track. Dennis created many conduits and wires between the two houses and added the sounds of a single tug boat and a foghorn calling to each other: "It was two voices only, representing my mother and me."

When the work was shown at the Sculpture Center in New York City, George Melrod wrote in *Art in America*,

> What really sets Dennis's work apart is the way it draws its inspiration from the real world, rather than from art theory, and the way it speaks to the heart rather than the intellect. *BLUE BRIDGE/red shift*, Dennis's richest work to date, is all the more appealing for its lack of esthetic narcissism. It dares the viewer to interact with it on a variety of levels and repays that attention every step of the way. [13]

In the late 1980s and the 1990s, Dennis also completed large-scale permanent public art commissions in New York and Boston. *Dreaming of Faraway Places: The Ships Come to Washington Market* (1988; Fig.13), created from metal fencing and ceramic medallions, was designed for New York's P.S. 234, on Greenwich Street. Dennis saw the fence, with its rhythmic, black-line and silhouette images of waterfront commerce, as an imaginary panorama. The sailing ships, tugboats, and barges were a story-telling frieze that flowed back and forth across the permanent buildings. She loved the versatility of that flowing black line and silhouette imagery, and used it to great advantage in her later public art commissions, culminating in *Traveling by Air*, created for Terminal One at JFK in 2001.

For *Tourist Cabins on Park Avenue* (2007; Fig. 14) Dennis was invited to place "tourist cabins" (similar to those done earlier) down the landscaped divide that separates north- and southbound Park Avenue. The tiny pastel board-and-batten structures offered a sharp contrast to the stately apartment buildings and rushing traffic, calling viewers back to bygone summers and humble pleasures. Dennis has characterized her work as being "drawn from the American vernacular, inspired by buildings shaped not by architects but by ordinary people. My installations are about buildings as repositories for, and the expressions of, memories, feelings, spiritual power. I like buildings that bear witness to those who have lived there, worked there, passed through."

By the mid-1990s Dennis felt that the women's movement had accomplished many of the goals it had set out for itself. Art made by women was everywhere, in every conceivable medium, answering old questions, asking new ones, and generally proceeding as though there was no reason to be concerned with gender differences at all. Dennis felt like she had lost her direction. The art world, it seemed to her, no longer welcomed "symbolic objects created by artists out of remembered emotions." Even so, in the catalog for the Cue Foundation's 2010 exhibition "That Is Then, This Is Now," Robert Storr wrote that "Donna Dennis decided that invoking places that exist in the imagination was a kind of conjuring trick that could be performed.... The results have a kind of dream fascination that irony subtly reinforces rather than undermines."[14]

The attack on 9/11 and the events that followed it had helped bring Dennis back to herself. From her studio near Ground Zero, she literally felt the destruction. Realizing how close a witness she had been to this terrible act, she felt a responsibility to do and to say something about her city. The artist's job, she believes, is to be a witness—to "create the echo of what it feels like to be human and to live through the time allotted to you—the time that will become history for the people who come after you." Dennis resumed working on *Coney Night Maze* (1997-2009; Pl. 6), a five-year-old but unfinished work inspired by the entrance to the legendary Cyclone roller coaster at Coney Island, a New York icon. "I was most attracted to the maze and then the two little buildings within it," she said, "to the whole complex of ad hoc buildings found at the entrance to the coaster." With renewed effort, she completed this major piece, and it will be shown at the Neuberger Museum in the spring of 2013.

The impact of Dennis's four decades of work was summed up by Deborah Everett, writing in *Sculpture* magazine:

> Aside from the formal achievements of Dennis's work, it has another appeal now—that of elucidating our identity at a time when the concepts of patriotism and Americanism are stirring public and private debates. All art, to some extent, reflects its culture of origin, but Dennis's work goes beyond that to reveal our secluded, self-absorbed inclinations. When we frequently find ourselves at odds with the world community—the embattled loner more than the good neighbor—our commitment to democracy and majority rule begs review. Dennis's vernacular architecture reveals the isolationism behind our individualism, posing timely questions about our capacity for social contracts, while offering a challenge to the courage of our convictions.[15] •

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NOTES

This article is based on my conversations with Donna Dennis that took place in her studio on April 17, April 23, August 8, and September 4, 2011. All quotations not otherwise cited are from these conversations

1. Lisa Lyons, *Scale and Environment: Ten Sculptors* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1972), 39.
2. Richard Marshall, *Developments in Recent Sculpture* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1981), 16.
3. Gerrit Henry "Reviews and Previews," *Art News*, 72 (June 1973): 93.
4. Quoted from unpublished notes by Donna Dennis.
5. Deborah Everett, "Donna Dennis: Home Away from Home," *Sculpture* (June 2008): 46.
6. George Tice is a New Jersey photographer whose work she had recently discovered. The *New York Times* reviewer, Benjamin Genocchio, said of Tice, "The combination of grim earnestness and dreamy pathos is entirely true to life," something that might be said of Dennis's work as well. See Benjamin Genocchio, "Art Review: Finding the Romantic Side of the Vistas in New Jersey," *New York Times* (August 2003).
7. Quoted from unpublished notes by Donna Dennis.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Carey Lovelace, "Donna Dennis: Intimate Immensity," *Arts Magazine* (June 1988): 91.
13. George Melrod, "Donna Dennis at the Sculpture Center," *Art in America*, 81 (October 1993):126.
14. Robert Storr, *That Is Then, This Is Now* (New York: Cue Art Foundation, 2010), 5.
15. Deborah Everett, "Donna Dennis, Home Away From Home," 49.