

(Part of Monika Rydiger's essay)

Postmodern games: References, pastiches and associations

The tendency in sculpture to experiment with architectural motifs and concepts was one aspect of a complex situation in the arts. Late modernism (which as far as transformations in sculpture are concerned was defined and analysed by the aforementioned Rosalind Krauss) coincided with general postmodernist cultural changes. In the field of architecture, those changes were brilliantly investigated and described in Charles Jencks' numerous publications. Meanwhile, clear, conscious allusions to architecture surfaced in the sculptures of Alice Aycock, Donna Dennis, Jackie Ferrara, and Siah Armajani. Critics swiftly dubbed this tendency 'mock-architecture', indicating that all the architectural motifs, references, pastiches, and associations in these works were used in a deliberately afunctional way.¹ As early as the 1970s, Alice Aycock began using architectural forms, structures, and materials in sculptures such as *Maze* (1972), *Wooden Shacks on Stilts with Platform* (1976), and *The Beginnings of a Complex...* (1977). However, in these works, she chiefly concentrated on space, developing sequences of it, and provoking viewers to 'use' it, actively. In this they still bear the marks of late modernist works. Indeed, there is a lack of postmodern double coding, irony, pastiche, metaphor, or eclectic decorativeness. However, Aycock took a completely different approach in another work unveiled in 1977, *The True and the False Project Entitled 'The World Is So Full of a Number of Things'*. In this instance, the viewer found nothing but contradictions in the mock-architectural structure – the doors do not open, the stairs are inaccessible, and the step ladder leads nowhere. An additional layer of paradox was provided by the accompanying text, which included the following lines: 'The false project after the catacombs of St. Sebastian. The true project after the astronomer Lord Rosse's telescoped construction "The Leviathan of Parsonstown"'. This did not clarify anything whatsoever. On the contrary, it prodded the viewer to go off in search of a host of complex and conflicting meanings. Robert Hobbs, who wrote a monograph on the artist, argued that the aforementioned work was deeply influenced by Roland Barthes' 1964 essay 'Rhetoric of the Image', which Aycock had read.² In her 1984 piece *The House of the Stoics*, Aycock used another strategy that is characteristic of postmodernism, creating a pastiche of American vernacular architecture. This white sculpture, which rises to almost 10 metres, is embellished with typical wooden detail (gingerbread trim), and the work looks like a cross between a miniature skyscraper and an oversized, kitschy doll's house.

Another artist who has sought inspiration for her sculptures in architecture – evoking American vernacular forms – is Donna Dennis. During the 1970s, she started her *Cabin Sculptures* series. These forms recalled the wooden tourist cabins that she had stayed in as a child, during family vacations. However, one cannot enter these structures, and Dennis stressed this inaccessibility by installing lamps inside the works. In *Tourist Cabin Porch*

¹ The term 'mock-architecture' was used by Edward Lucie-Smith in the book *Art in the Seventies* (1980). See also G. Dziamski, *Awangarda po awangardzie, od neoawangardy do postmodernizmu*, Poznań 1996, p.172

² See Christine Filippone, 'Alice Aycock: Sculpture and Projects', *Woman's Art Journal*, 2006, vol.27, no. 1 https://www.academia.edu/814023/Alice_Aycock_Sculpture_and_Projects?email_work_card=view-paper (accessed 27.10.2023)

(Maine) (1976), she made use of a photograph taken during a nostalgic trip to Maine. However, in the work itself, she only recreated the distinctive front of the cabin, with its glass-covered porch. This ‘transplant’ of a selected element from an entire structure is characteristic of the postmodern tendency towards fragmentation. Meanwhile, the form of the work *BLUE BRIDGE/red shift* (1991-1993) was dictated by parts of three railway lift bridges crossing the Hackensack River in New Jersey. Dennis studied these structures carefully, and made use of her own photographs of the sites. The work itself features suggestive blue and red light and is further complemented by the sounds of a boat and a foghorn communicating with each other. All this combines to create a peculiar experience. The viewer enters a dark interior, and is faced with a mock-architectural structure, whose distinctive truss construction and imposing dimensions (3.7 x 4.3 x 7.3 metres) give the semblance of a real, functioning device. At the same time, one is enveloped by an extraordinary aura, prompting questions about whether there is a hidden metaphor. Donna Dennis encoded this deeper meaning in the title. ‘As I completed the work in the weeks after my mother died,’ the artist recalled, ‘I decided to dedicate it to her and to the memory of our complex but loving relationship. After she died, I added “red shift” to the BLUE BRIDGE title because in astronomy, a celestial body glowing red is understood to be moving away from us, while something that appears blue is moving toward us.’³ Jan Riley very aptly described Dennis’ method as ‘re-imagining an American vernacular’, simultaneously recounting an amusing anecdote about the difficulties of installing one of Dennis’ sculptures at an exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati in 1987. The traditional methods of building wooden structures had already become somewhat forgotten by then, and during the assembly of the sculptures in the gallery, one of the technicians angrily lamented that one day, ‘some idiot gave this woman a saw and the idea that she could build anything.’⁴ Theoreticians of postmodernism, studying and describing the nature of this cultural term, have often pointed to the characteristic practice of making references to other works and creating pastiches. Hal Foster, in *(Post)modern Polemics*, declared that ‘it is fair to say that pastiche is the official style of this postmodernist camp.’⁵ Thus, sculpture from this period reveals the same tendency.

Nevertheless, these kinds of literal references and apparently direct borrowings were avoided by Jackie Ferrara – the third of the previously mentioned sculptors who created architectural sculptures in the 1970s and ’80s. In the case of her works, one finds a strong nostalgia for the distant past and an intuitive exploration of it – also typical of postmodernists. Charles Jencks saw a kind of ‘anamnesis’ in this, which manifests itself in the recollection of fragments of ideas, content, forms, and motifs from the past.⁶ Jackie Ferrara’s various *Pyramids*, *Stairs*, *Houses*, and *Arenas* evoke mysterious buildings that seem closer to an unspecified lost civilisation. These distinctive structures were made from

³ Quote from the artist’s official internet site <https://www.donnadennisart.com/artworks/blue-bridge-red-shift> (accessed 29.10.2023)

⁴ Quoted in J. Riley, ‘Donna Dennis. Re-imagining an American Vernacular’, / *Woman’s Art Journal*, Vol.33, No. 2, p. 11. <https://www.donnadennisart.com/attachment/en/5c66efdea5aa2caf42679d3e/News/5c112c1372a72c471c23e069> (accessed 31.10.2023)

⁵ Quoted by H. Foster, ‘(Post)Modern Polemics’, *RECODINGS. Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Seattle, Washington 1987, p.127 https://monoskop.org/images/a/a0/Foster_Hal_Recordings_Art_Spectacle_and_Cultural_Politics.pdf (accessed 31.10.2023)

⁶ C. Jencks, ‘Postmodern Poetics and the New Rules’, *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. T. Docherty, New York 1993, pp.286-288

modules cut from wood or plywood, laid one on top of the other, and combined. 'If I wanted to evoke anything,' the artist said, '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 3000 years in the future. Or come from Mars.'⁷

⁷ Quoted in https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_463_300019087.pdf (accessed 31.10.2023)