

You Get Energy from the Connection

Heidi Zuckerman
in Conversation with

Anna Sew Hoy

Date: March 1, 2017
Location: Aspen, CO
Occasion: Solo AAM Exhibition:
Magnetic Between

HZ You are here on the occasion of your opening at the Aspen Art Museum with a series of newly commissioned sculptures for the Roof Deck Sculpture Garden. This is the second time you've shown your work at the museum—I was fortunate enough to include some of it in an exhibition called *Now You See It* some years ago. That show was about the possibilities of transcendence through art and the inherent failure of trying to do something special and almost impossible. Can you start by talking about how this relates to your practice in general?

ASH In terms of attempting to do something impossible, I've always been interested in trying to create utopian space. For example, in a work like *Psychic Body Grotto* [2017]—a public sculpture I intend to make for the Los Angeles River—I am trying to make a space against the Cartesian. Why do the rooms we live in use right angles? Why are they so square? I was thinking about a space like a cockpit, a place where you could take in the landscape and become energized by it. My work currently at the museum presents different ways to enclose and inhabit space.

HZ When I was a kid, I designed a house that consisted of a series of domed rooms that all connected like a caterpillar. I was drawn to that notion of organic, curvilinear space, as opposed to the rigid rectangular or square spaces we often inhabit. The space that you're talking about creating for the Los Angeles River is semi-enclosed, but it's permeable.

ASH Yes. It's just enough matter, so you feel protected. It's a skeleton of a space. An earlier sculpture, *Blue Views* [2010], was essentially an enlargement of two cupped hands touching at the fingertips, and the space for *Psychic Body Grotto* is similar. It envelops space with very little matter, so you can see out and see in.

It will be made from bronze and on long-term loan from myself and Los Angeles Nomadic Division to the State Historic Park in Downtown Los Angeles. It's difficult to get a permanent public piece passed through the city of LA because an annual budget is needed for the sculpture's maintenance—and that takes forever to pass. *Psychic Body Grotto* will be at a state park, so under California auspices. If the public likes it, then it will probably be allowed to stay.

HZ Do you define yourself as a sculptor who makes sculpture, or do you think about your work in a different way?

- ASH When people ask me what I do, I usually say that I make sculpture, but I think of it in an expansive way. I work with matter; I work with stuff, and the result can be sculpture, but also installation and performance.
- HZ The kind of stuff you work with consists of a pretty broad range of materials. The bronze is a new thing for you, and you also work with denim, which I would consider at opposite ends of a spectrum. What are some of the other materials you use?
- ASH A lot of clay, some wood, steel, trench coats, and cell phone cables. I've also used beer cans, keyboards, and resin—a lot of different materials.
- HZ You have included denim in your installation here at the museum. What is it about that material that attracts you to it?
- ASH It's so readily available, and everybody knows exactly what it is. Jeans are recognizable around the world, and everyone has a sense memory associated with them. As a material, denim has myriad physical properties. It comes in every color and print, can be torn and frayed, or cut neatly. It can be sewn or glued, hemmed or raw. When I apply it to my abstract forms, I am butting the strange against the everyday.
- HZ Where did the denim come from? Did it belong to someone else?
- ASH It actually came from the thrift store. It's from a pair of acid-washed jeans and a couple pairs of black jeans. I also use my clothes in my work, as well as my partner's and my friends' clothes. It's a mix.
- HZ Do you select the objects because of the materiality rather than who used to wear them or any other implied content?
- ASH Implied content could mean who used to wear them, but it's also what you think of when you see that familiar piece of clothing. A trench coat and pair of jeans are iconic. There isn't a specific place where I need your mind to go when you see that material, but I want to tap into your personal associations.
- HZ Are you interested in the trench coat as being protection from the weather but also the reveal?

ASH Yes, I'm interested in both ideas of protection and reveal. I ended up removing all the panels of fabric and just keeping the seams, so it essentially left the skeleton of the trench coat. I took away the protective aspect and perversely left the reveal.

HZ I've thought about your interest in the seam, but now I'm also thinking about how the seam is where two usually similar elements come together. Some of the interesting aspects of your installation on the roof-deck are the disparate materials that join and those points of intersection.

ASH There is a lot of energy that comes out of different things bumping up against each other. That could be a life philosophy as well. *Speedy Communication* [2016], installed here at the museum, consists of a picnic table, a granite rock taken from the Roaring Fork River, and a speech bubble made out of a strip of jeans.

HZ Those are pretty disparate materials. When you talk about the energy that bounces off of different things as a life philosophy, are you talking about people and ideas?

ASH Yes. In *Speedy Communication*, the rock is hard and dense, while the denim is more giving and conforms to other shapes. The denim will also weather, while the rock will survive a lot longer. The material properties of each element become apparent in this moment of contrast. The sculpture is the embodiment of disparate subjects coexisting and becoming a frame or foil for each other. I hope that what is happening formally in the sculpture can point to the possibility of different ways of living and thinking being present together in the same space—not necessarily getting along, but being instructive to one another by being visible and seen.

HZ So it's a desired experience or outcome.

ASH Yeah, it's good. It's also difficult, especially in sculpture when you're trying to glue something super heavy to something very light. It's difficult to make those things come together, but you get energy from the connection.

HZ It's interesting when the intersection of art and life comes together—that's one of the goals. It's often a subtext in contemporary art, but artists don't necessarily own that in the way that you are doing.

- ASH It's because I believe so completely that the formal things in my sculpture have real content. What the materials are doing and where they are placed are at the heart of the sculpture and at the heart of the idea. For example, the picnic table in *Speedy Communication* is installed between the café inside and the sculptures in the outdoor courtyard. This piece was conceived to be a transition between the two spaces. Viewers are invited to sit at the table with their coffee and contemplate the rock and speech bubble, as well as look at the sculptures beyond.
- HZ You've made a number of clay, table-sized maquettes of *Psychic Body Grotto*, and one in particular is very painterly. Is that part of the final bronze public sculpture?
- ASH I believe you are thinking of a wild glaze combination on one of the ceramic grottos. I want the public sculpture to have a psychedelic finish. The thing about bronze is that, generally, patina is not like glaze. With glaze, there are endless color and texture options. We're going to have to experiment a lot with the patina to get the brightest, most different-looking colors.
- HZ There are similarities between your show here and the one in 2015 at Various Small Fires with the cinder blocks and tunnel forms.
- ASH My shorthand for the tunnel forms is "hoods." When I get grandiose, I think of them as land art or cathedrals, which they're not because they're so small. Instead, they are like models of those. I think of them as having their own ecosystems because they have sand on the bottom, they're open-faced, but there's also a skylight in the back, so the sun can go through the skylight and make a bright spot that moves through the cathedral space of the hood—like Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* [1976].
- HZ Some of them have mirrors, too, so there's a reflective element.
- ASH Yeah. The mirror is there to show how mysterious space is. There are some sculptures where I'm framing space by using a powder-coated steel rod to draw a line around it. Then the mirrors in other pieces reflect that space. I use both framed and reflected space in the same installation so that the real and reflected become confused. I want an unknown space that hasn't existed yet to come forward.

- HZ Can you explain what you mean by “unknown” space?
- ASH It’s a space for something to happen that hasn’t ever happened. This goes back to the utopian space. I create spaces that haven’t existed yet to show that we don’t have to take the world as we find it. We have the ability to create and materialize a new conception of it.
- HZ That notion is very utopian and hopeful; it’s filled with infinite possibility. Can you talk about how other older pieces relate to your installation at the museum?
- ASH *Magnetic Between* [2015] and *Solitary Observer* [2015] are fiberglass casts of older works I call *Mirror Blobs*. The original plaster and papier-mâché versions have been cast in fiberglass in order to survive the rain, snow, and sleet of Aspen’s winter. *Mirror Blobs* were conceived as objects for action, so they are on wheels. There’s a hollow in each part of *Magnetic Between* where a performer may lounge. My installation for the Aspen Art Museum advances ideas of sculpture-for-performance and sculpture-for-living that I’ve been working on for some time. In February, Flora Wiegmann and I will present a performance that demonstrates potential movements and uses of the sculptures.
- HZ So much of what we do on a daily basis is guided by memory and these intangible tangibles—like the way something felt or smelled or the way something is a catalyst for a thought about something else. The placement of objects in space can be conducive in that way. It’s not only about the energy or interactivity between items; it’s also about what’s missing. There’s possibility and hopefulness in the presence as well as in the absence.
- You have a series of works called *Echo Chamber* [2008], which relates to the mirrored pieces at the museum. There is repetition, and each one is familiar but different. They are objects that you can penetrate or move through. Some are dense; others have a developing physicality on the surface. They are also an interesting precedent for what you have with us now.
- ASH Yes. They were about looking and having your view obstructed, or seeing a reflection and not knowing if it is actually a window. I was interested in the oblique view. You aren’t looking at your face in those mirrors because they are placed too low. You get a sidelong, oblique view—one that you wouldn’t necessarily notice. You can see your calves or knees or somebody’s elbow.

HZ The peripheral is part of our everyday interactions. Something might catch our attention or catch us off guard and allow for a pause or shift of intention. It's in that moment of noticing that there's an inherent possibility for more.

ASH Yes. Sometimes the most important things are in the margins. Jeff Burton's photographs have been a revelation for me. He worked as a set photographer and would make his artwork during his day job—just pointing his camera to the side of the *mise-en-scène*. That's where he found his pictures—in the margins of the main action.

All my sculpture is made to be viewed in the round. That's something I learned from looking at Auguste Rodin's work. You have to move around it to see it. I wanted to push that idea to the fore, so I made objects that you can move around but can also be moved.

HZ This notion of interactivity is something that you're continuing to embrace. For example, one of the works at the museum that you referenced earlier—the white picnic table with the thought bubble and rock—is something that people can actually sit on. Why is that important to you?

ASH Sculpture exists to be looked at, but it's also to be lived with. Spending downtime with it is important. Another work I made, *Dialogue Bench* from 2013, is also a bench you can sit on, and there's a Kleenex-dispensing sculpture on it. You get to sit next to the piece instead of looking at it on a pedestal. *Dialogue Bench* creates potential for a different connection and relationship—one without alienation.

HZ This idea that you, as an artist, can create circumstances to allow people to have different types of interactions, diminish any alienation, and enhance the possibility for more is great. Thanks for being here and talking with us about your work.

ASH Thank you, Heidi.