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Teresa Vaitkus

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CONSTRUCTING A LIFE

by

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INTRODUCTION

It was at the early age of nine when I realized people liked their objects together. This was a hard learned lesson in the event that I had taken apart my brother's accordian and graciously presented the pieces to my mother as a birthday gift. Needless to say no one thought it valuable; in fact, I was punished for such a display of creativity. People needed their "things" eternally fixed into size, shape, and context. What I had seen as valuable were the parts and not the whole. The parts could transform into objects of love; while the accordian as a whole merely sat in a box under the bed.

Thirteen years and a BFA later, working as a union laborer, my love for permutations would again surface on construction and demolition sites. The rapid alterations, changes, and transformations that occurred in my life and work place became my form of an ordered world. There was value and visual potential in everything that had once been something else. In fact, this was content. In every reality there is a sense of nature; in all of nature nothing is permanent and eventually everything becomes a part of something else.

The combination of working and creating is the combination of putting together and taking apart. It is a pattern of synthesis and analysis, integration and differentiation. This process is the force behind truly being alive. It is a pattern of relationships and experiences. What is revealed in the pattern is what I attempt to render in my work. That is to restore new meaning and completeness to the many fragments that one encounters in life. The work is an attempt to
achieve harmony by proportioning the heavy and the dense with the fragile and the delicate. For me glass and brick talk about those kinds of energies.
I PATTERN OF RELATIONSHIPS

A) Materials

In the early 1900's the German architect Bruno Taut devoted all of his energy to building an environment made of glass. To him glass was the material where mind and matter were reconciled. Glass stood for brighter awareness, clearer determination, and an utter gentleness despite its sharp edges. Taut propagated a mythology of glass that stood for nothing less than a new morality. In Taut's words "a person who daily sets his eyes on the splendor of glass cannot do wicked deeds."¹ Along with other German Expressionists, Taut formed a group that was to be known as the "glass chain." Correspondence between these men centered on the fanaticism that glass, in its transparent beauty, could free the world from structure. The earth would become a single source of light and the effect would be that everything would appear self-supporting.

It is this inherent property of glass that I am concerned with. It is the question of how to build with something so fragile and seemingly free of structure. How does one manipulate a material that has the power to open up and close spaces; a material that sparkles, flashes, dances and warns that with a slight tinkling sound it could break. Like Taut's morality, my interest is in illumination, reflection, and dispersion. These qualities of glass are what I emphasize in my life and are the real "supports" in the work.

If the nature of something is truly revealed by its opposite, then the decision to use brick in the work is not surprising. Though they may be related in an architectural sense, it is the unique properties of each material that I am most interested in.

Brick is one of the most perfect building units in that it has been scaled to the human hand. The surface of a brick can be broken down into many equal parts. In its Euclidean logic it defines control. As a building unit it ideally works within the limitations of the block. Anything square is energetically blunt. Practicality takes on the character of inflexibility and to a certain extent stubbornness. Reason lacks imagination where mathematics sits on the heart as an unshakable foundation. This is seen as the sciences ultimately search for absolutes. In the brick, order takes precedence over poetic grace.

However, the form of an object is not only its shape. Its form stands in its specific nature. In Maurice Meleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* he discusses something called 'synaesthie perception.' This is simply interpreted as that which appeals to all our senses.

A brick feels heavy in the hand. It is dense in its communication as an unyielding logical part of something. A brick begs to be accompanied by more bricks; to become a wall or a floor. It depends on mass to make its statement. A solid brick defines its texture aggressively. Clay is of the earth and its transformation by fire into a permanent solid reveals little noticable difference.

In comparison, glass in its raw state is a bucket full of mixed opaque particles. When put to fire glass becomes lusciously fluid and beautifully seductive in its purity. Upon cooling and within seconds
this foreign material freezes. Because of its extreme sensitivity to process and the environment, elaborate measures are taken to keep it from cracking. There is something inhuman about glass. Perhaps in its transparent theatrics the mind is set to wonder. Its manipulation of light attracts the senses like nothing else. Even though it may not be a survivor like brick, glass has a special place in time because of its fragility.

B) Structure

Upon seeing the differences in the form of materials it becomes possible to understand how these natures compliment one another in a structure. Their strengths measure physical phenomena. This dualism of imagery helps the elements make connection with their opposite to reach fullness of meaning (Insert, Set 1). The hard rigidity of the brick flatters the soft fluidity of the glass. The slightly green glass plays off the earth bound hues of the brick. The glass accepts the light that was not allowed to pass through the brick. The brick demands the space that it occupies while the glass appears to move freely around it.

In Set 2 (Insert), the organic, slightly animated glass elements are permutations. They originated from standard architectural glass blocks. By reheating them I wanted to capture the fluid nature of glass. The glass structures are always asymmetrical. They are meant to unleash a permeating gesture in harmony with the brick. They are compositions that establish identity amid change. Identities that evolved from a process.
C) Mind/Body

Structure implies transformation. Yet it not only has its relationship to material changes but to mind/body transformations and processes as well. Jean Piaget expressed that "bodily actions and surrounding objects are inseparately a part of each other; descriptions of a world can never be separated from activities." ²

Yet, a problem arises when any metaphoric association is guided by conscious and unconscious motivations. Activities between the mind and body appear to take on a duality of their own at times. I:

start change smear
construct open ponder cut
twist draw stack diminish shift
squeeze pull grind
measure risk grab recognize ram on...
bleed stamp transform
burn engineer
rest taste connect
miss

talk drop

These are some of the mental and physical activities that I go through in order to achieve a coherent structure. A group of phenomena is structured if it is a system with internal cohesiveness. I see this cohesiveness being revealed by recognizing these mental and physical transformations. I have learned to depend on them in my work and in my life. They are permeations that logically come from the previous activity and continue to flow into the next.

To this point the discussion has centered on a pattern of relationships. The relationship of the material to the form, the form to the structure, the structure to the mind/body are all interrelated. It is a pattern of opposites and their polar connection to each other.

Glass is the Body
Body is the Gesture/Permutation
The Gesture/Permutation is the Glass

Brick is the Mind
Mind is the Logic
The Logic is the Brick

The materials are seen as opposites in nature, the structure composed of opposite forms, and the mind/body working with opposing energies (Insert, Set 2). These pieces were created to emphasize all of the opposite qualities that we are made of. I attempted to put the materials in proportion to each other so that they would harmonize as a totality. The control that I was looking for was strength in opposites while giving off light. The pattern unites the differences by balancing the parts.
A person or thing rarely can accept externally imposed criterion of what it ought to be. All things are made up of parts that have a nature of their own. By revealing the differences and their natures, a pattern is discovered. The pattern for me is that all opposites are balanced in harmony with themselves. When people are in harmony with all of their opposing differences they are as clear and illuminating as glass. They have a patterned system that frees them from all outside methods and forces (Insert, Set 3). This work is meant to illustrate that balanced system. Protected from outside forces, the cylinder within is complimented by the contour superstructure of the bricks. The glass droplets play off of the bricks in their fragility, yet compliment the cylinder and over all contour in their oval shapes. I was not burdened with a preconceived image of how the bricks should be. After recognizing how to unite the differences between them and the glass, the bricks naturally took their own form. They then became part of the pattern. The system was balanced with internal relationships and became a totality.
II  PATTERN OF EXPERIENCE

A) Learning a Visual Language

The pieces that I make are not only related to materials, form, and the mind/body. They are equally concerned with how all of these things actually come to exist in the state that they are in at the present time. This reference appears to have something to do with experiences.

At the time of this writing it is no small thing that I am thus far an academic artist. I have supposedly been taught ways of looking at the world as well as my own work. Most of this experience has come through a descriptive, historical method of teaching. In contrast to this background another reference arises from experience as a construction worker. The importance of coming to terms with these two varied experiences is an essential part in the foundation of the work. The question of how to build something (anything) is the root that these two experiences have in common. Things fall apart and/or must be rearranged either mentally or physically in order to be rebuilt. Ideas grow and stagnate, stretch and shrink. It is the same pattern in both. It is a pattern of rebuilding, reflection, and order.

Building is the recognition of matter and the success of any man-made thing depends on its eliciting responses based on acquired experience. While a reference may be unfamiliar and its meaning in an image seem contradictory, it may still express valued knowledge and feeling. As I worked on construction sites I felt that there were many "sculptures" and "paintings" that had so much potential if they were
just placed somewhere else. Yet, there was a common visual language. It was "if the most unrelated things share a common place, time, or odd similarity there develops wonderful unities and peculiar relationships and one thing reminds us of everything else."\(^3\) So an experience occurs where one question is answered while provoking another. In my questioning of construction site images I gave meaning to something because of its diverse possibilities. Although none of this was "art", because of my past experiences it made for a visual vernacular.

In Jack Burnham's *The Structure of Art*, he explains that "the difficulty of making abstract art intelligible is fundamentally semantic and not esthetic."\(^4\) A patterned language gives the person who uses it the power to create an infinite variety of images just as ordinary language gives us the power to create an infinite number of sentences. Old means become content for new usages. In some of the works I try to talk about the infinite variety of uses and experiences that the viewer can draw upon (Insert, Sets 4 and 5). They are like a "Lego" set for the viewer to visually arrange himself. These pieces are seen as propositions about art and art activities. Their arrangements change according to the environment. As animated transformations of architectural blocks these pieces refuse to stay in one place and be categorized. They find meaning in galleries, on rooftops, and on landscapes.

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\(^3\) Author and source unknown but referred to as Novallis.

Alfred North Whitehead once said "that nature is a dull affair, soundless, senseless, colorless, merely the hurrying of material, endless and meaningless." Though I may not totally agree with this, it does profess the point that we can only apprehend, give meaning, and communicate by making up our own language according to the experience and sensations at hand.

Both making and looking are actions, where different conditions require radically different personality orientations. The pieces in Sets 4 and 5 propose to the viewer that in order to connect with them he must also interact and give meaning to them. Like Jean Piaget said:

Knowledge results from continuous construction, since in each act of understanding some degree of invention is involved; in development the passage from one stage to the next is always characterized by the formation of new structures which did not exist before, either in the external world or in the subjects mind.

B) Building Techniques

Though I may ask the viewer to find his own orientation at times, this isn't meant to imply that no information is given or that initial technique is disregarded. I have found that by using a slumping technique, heat imposes a subtle gesture on a frozen shape where I have the ability to control and identify with the moving glass. Glass


that begins as a sheet or an architectural block has a past and requires the recognition of it. Molten furnace glass is organic. The pieces that ask for poured glass never lose the primitiveness of the pour (Insert, Set 1). The poured pieces interact on a more ritualistic exchange while the slumped works are more playful in their superstructure (Insert, Sets 4 and 5).

The techniques that I chose depend on whether the glass should have as history or not. The engineering of the glass leans toward the spirit of gesture. I try to manipulate the glass in such a way that it defines it past while exploring a new identity. The emphasis is on the fragility and the fluidity of glass. This is not meant to be seen as a weakness, rather a way to redefine strength. Strength acquired by light and movement as opposed to the dense static logic of the brick.

What I strive for in a number of pieces is, in fact, to have the glass forms protecting that which seemingly does not need it. An inherent property of glass is that it has the unique ability to be fragile and protecting at the same time. People see windows, tumblers, eye apparel, microscope slides, etc. to have both of these qualities.

C) Systems of Execution

It is because of ever changing conditions that I allow myself to work without a drawing. My "blueprint" is the combination of the pattern in my mind, space, chance, necessity and spirit. It is important for me to recognize transformations as they occur so I might use them to my best advantage. I depend on them.
In his conclusion on building Forrest Wilson discussed how this kind of system works.

Building is a creative activity in which the decisive moment is the instant of conception, that instant when the spirit takes shape and all the features of the new creation are yet to be determined. The final form results from a multiplicity of instances, each playing a decisive part in the creative process. If we can identify and seize these instances then we can begin to understand what control is in the creative process.  

To make something work for me patterns must be generated on site so that each one takes its own shape according to the context. If not, there is no bases for knowing the subtle differences that may be required. Therefore it is essential that details are carried out according to the environment and pattern in my mind. Sets of images are applied to the structure in its final realization. It is a situation where things develop from associative contexts. The actions of putting together and taking away are an unavoidable system of polarity. The action and the space are indivisible. The action is supported by the space and the space supports the action. It is a pattern that all the elements themselves define. This is what enables me to work, rework, and redefine a given set of objects over and over again according to the environment.

It is important to note that I find these actions as order and inverse order. Each is equally important as order is the act of putting together, and inverse order is seen as the act of taking apart/away.

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These transitional states are both positive steps. As conditional opposites, they can also be seen in the work. In some pieces it looks like things have been added and subtracted. There is even some question as to whether the pieces are finished or not.

I believe this flux is important to the subsistence of life. We build, tear down, and rearrange. I try to relate the work to strength and fragility because I see these as the two qualities that help us to survive. They compliment one another as a "cosmology" in the work and enable me to understand the world a little better.
III CONSTRUCTING A LIFE

A) Cosmology

Cosmology is the study of the origin, process, and structure of the universe. For me art and architecture become its secular metaphor. Simply stated they are the "timeless way of building". The timeless way of building is a life and work process that reveres all process. What Christopher Alexander describes in his book is a way for the average worker/artist/architect to capture a clairvoyance in everyday life. For him, once this is accomplished, a person has the ability to use neutral images with active concepts. If we can revere process in our work and life, then we can begin to really live. For example, the "sculptures" on the construction site were a matter of turning neutral images into active concepts. The materials that I use in my own pieces turn neutral bricks into active concepts.

B) Structuralism

With regard to art, the Structural Anthropologist Claude-Levis Strauss talks about this kind of perception to its fullest in "The Savage Mind." As a totemist, Strauss shows man in his environment unavoidably producing a framework of values which unconsciously extend into the making of art. Strauss' term for this kind of individual is the "bricoleur." In French, the bricoleur is a kind of handyman who uses whatever means are available. His significance lies in the fact that his

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forms or materials have no preordained function; they find their place according to spur of the moment activities. Instead of giving form to function or meaning, the bricoleur gives meaning to form. There are no strict procedures, source of supplies, or precise set of objectives. All products of the bricoleur develop from things at hand which can be imaginatively recombined.

Yet, use is limited to the fact that most signs already possess certain implications within a structure; signs being materials, colors, shapes or other qualities. They may be freely manipulated but still represent the same implicit and recognized associations. To Strauss the artist manipulates signs into various permutations (Insert, Sets 4 and 5). The fact that they are subjected to novel arrangements alters their powers and potential for future signification. When forms are subjected to comparison they are continually reconstituted. In Strauss' words:

The bricoleur also and indeed principally, derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he 'speaks' not only with things, as we have seen, but also through the medium of things: giving account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the possibilities.9

In this act he builds up structures by putting together events. Expression is a totality of relationships where images and patterns are formed as reflections. (This is why I use the glass as I do.) These reflections are equivalent to real objects as signs begin to assume the states of things signified. In short, structuralism is the search for

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unsuspected harmonies. It becomes the discovery of a system of relations latent in a series of objects.
CONCLUSION

The titles I have chosen for the works are related to the Eastern idea that all cosmic order is multi-dimensional and is the outcome of a preceding chaos. In a sense the titles play Western technology against Eastern philosophy. In the East art represents a continuous condition. Western thought is generally linked to space/time limitations. The Ch'an Zen discipline is one of activity and order. Its doctrine is the invalidity of doctrine, and its end is an illumination by immediate experience.

What you see in the photographs, gallery and outdoor pieces are not objects that are works of art in themselves. It is the particular arrangement, relationship, and form of the objects among other objects that is the creative idea. Interdependence is asserted between my life, the art, the process, and the spatial environment. Systems may change, but illumination, reflection, and dispersion remain constant; being true to the nature of the glass itself.
...to protect by putting faith in cutting elusive fragile objects all of us were held up by light simple process of keeping it together we all live with light and movement we do not all live with art self-supporting allusions...

T. Vaitkus
i would like the work to be non-work
this means that it would find its way
beyond my preconceptions
what i want of my art i can eventually find
the work must go beyond this
It is my main concern to go beyond what i know
and what i can know
the formal principles are understandable and understood
it is the unknown quality from which and where
i want to go
As a thing, an object, it accedes to its non-logical self
It is something, it is nothing

Eva Hesse
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


SET 1  "Lakshmi" (close-up)
SET 2  “Mahādevi Rising”  (close-up)
SET 2  "Mahādevi Rising" (close-up)
SET 3 "Maithuni At Work"
From "The Asuras Trip"