

REGEN PROJECTS

Rachel Harrison: if i did it, essay “Sculpture in an Abandoned Field”
by John Kelsey, published by JRPIRingier, Zurich, Switzerland, 2007,
pp. 120 – 125



Bildunterschrift fehlt noch
Mike Kelley
Framed and Frame
1999
Installation view of Framed.
Mixed media. 131 x 161 x 191"
Magasin, C.N.A.C, Grenoble.
Photograph by André Morin.

Sculpture In an Abandoned Field

John Kelsey

Some sculptures seem
to want a pedestal,
others obscene graffiti...

Michel Leiris

Erection Set

The word “sculpture” is from the Latin *sculpere*, to scratch, to carve. By contrast, from *status*, position, comes *statuere*, to set up, or statue. Like the bronzes that occupy our parks and plazas, these works come attached to the names of famous men, and they stand up, like homo-erectations, in space, sometimes on pedestals. Statues also seem to all but beckon graffiti, hit, as it were, with at least a sort of make-up. Rachel Harrison does not cast or carve but, in several senses, she *sets up* her works: she erects, of course, but also establishes, plans, and maybe even tricks these works into situations where they will be “caught” or “blamed.” How else can one explain their excessive costumes and colors, or the way they distract us from their erections with drinks, pictures, Styrofoam apples, and other unexpected offerings? So many shameless tactics both to grab our attention and to divert it from a sculptural condition that her works do not seem exactly comfortable with. These are the most psychological sculptures we’ve ever met, so much so that it seems fitting to call them *complexes* rather than the Rauschenbergian *combines*. And like a blush or a rash, a paintjob can be a sort of betrayal, or like the ink of a re-treating octopus.

With status and stature come Woods, Alexander, and Gore, although some of these figures are famously unstable: Al Gore got the most votes, lost anyway, and ended up with an Oscar instead; the strange sign that Tiger Woods really did belong to the white world of golf was his being suited in a green PGA blazer; when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, New Orleans resident Fats Domino was proclaimed dead (his big house sentimentally spray-painted “RIP Fats. You will be missed.”), then a day or two later was found to be back among the living; the merchant and navigator Amerigo Vespucci discovered America before Columbus, but this claim has been disputed, and although America took his name we never celebrate Vespucci Day. What these Harrisons

tell us about status is that it’s a historical, juridical, and retinal set-up, possible only if something else is positioned at the same time as a spectator, a citizen, or a nobody. And the men she chooses, the statues she erects, in so many ways travesty their own verticality, reminding us of the hollowness hidden at the center of every bronze.¹ These are *complexed* erections.

On a recent trip to Corsica, Harrison photographed the ancient *menhirs*, or vaguely man-shaped stones that stand around the island with no other job than to have their pictures taken by tourists. It’s a funny coincidence that the *men* in *menhir* is actually Middle Breton for “stone” (*menhir* means “long stone”). And that, long before Harrison’s visit, Alberto Giacometti (with Michel Leiris) gazed upon the same long, mysterious “men.”² If their influence on the Italian sculptor can be seen in his pin-shaped figures, Leiris, on the other hand, would go on to write obsessive autobiographical accounts of sexual impotence (in *Manhood* and *L’Afrique fantôme*). There is something so inescapably idiotic about these standing stones, and we are not sure if this has more to do with their timeless verticality, with the fact that they never change or go away, or if it’s more about the fact of looking at them now through the viewfinder of a flimsy point-and-shoot and getting nothing back but more instant moments of this mute eternity. Stones can be read, and these must have meant something once, but whatever they signified in their time was probably as idiotic as what we read in them today: man-made erections in an empty landscape, dumb rocks. If Harrison borrows anything from the menhirs in her recent sculptures, it’s not their mystery but their idiocy.

Pylons in nylons

I remember “muscle magazines”
nothing to do
with building muscles.³

Joe Brainard

There is no way to take these new sculptures but as stand-ins and imposters. Standing in for men, they perform their statuesque spiel in drag and act out verticality as a sort of camp routine.⁴

They are not only set-ups but placeholders, because to have status or mean something is first of all to be *positioned*, like a post or pole. When a Harrison inscribes itself in space (and in discourse), it is with a transvestite sort of intelligence, or like *Johnny Depp* in his pirate role, as a sort of chameleon in earrings. What was it that Jacques Lacan said about the phallus and veils, how it always hides in skirts?⁵ *Claude Lévi-Strauss* might be the key to open this men's warehouse, splitting itself before our eyes into a binary male-female set-up. It is both elementary structure and gateway, positioned so that the viewer passes between its two poles – cock and hen. The mounted game birds usher us into a game of either/or, so that we literally traverse this hallway-size gap that both distinguishes and founds a sexual relation, one that, according to Lacan, does not exist.

To mount a game bird is also to stuff and to sew it, and it's funny how the unmanly arts and crafts, in the end, are what prove the hunter's mettle in the field. To take a trophy readymade and place it on a post is, in a way, to re-prove this thing, but it's also to fluff the post. *Claude Lévi-Strauss* is a conversation not only between male and female but between columns and feathers, and the fact that the columns are in turn supported by a U.S. Postal Service box and a Sharp inkjet fax box reminds us that what's going on between the birds and in the sculpture is no less efficient and confused than what happens between people when they (purport to) communicate. As nearly obsolete forms of communication, the postal system and the fax also say something about what communication itself outmodes in the name of eliminating distances. Whether the space between these totems is more open than closed, at this point, is a good question.

Like the colorized statues that surround him, the cock is painted, because in the animal kingdom the fierce order of virility always comes with make-up, like our TV politicians today. *Al Gore* is accessorized not only with a thermostat but is dappled in the bright, sunny pinks and greens of a Monet lily pond. The inconvenient truth about this sculpture is that its hard, vertical mass is also a skin – a sensitive, Impressionist surface smeared over an inner emptiness, nothing but quick-dry surface effect. *Alexander the Great's* paint job mimics the red and blue graphics of a ready-

made waste paper basket. Jeff Gordon, the racecar driver, is represented on this hollow can by a slick headshot, recalling an earlier Harrison reference to Buckethead (the guitarist who replaced Slash in Guns n' Roses) in the form of a sort of human-sculpture who appears on stage with a take-out fried chicken bucket covering his head). As racecars are branded with corporate logos (Dupont, Pepsi, Nextel), so has the conqueror Alexander been decorated with a festive harlequin skin, as well as a gold-starred cape and spooky make-up from some bygone decade. The child-size mannequin that tops off the sculpture is a sexless creature and, mimicking the pose of *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*, makes over and doubles something heroic and statuesque in other, Harrisonesque terms. The mannequin's head is fitted with a plastic Abe Lincoln mask, facing backward, Janus-like, and in the end there is no end to this work, no right way to face it. It is an irreconcilable, doubled, bi- or trans-sculptural complex perched on a clean white plinth two sizes too small for the mass it pretends to support.

More diabolical styling tips: *Fats Domino* dressed in vintage Louise Nevelson with a readymade can of Slim Fast for a hat; *R.W. Fassbinder* carried on a wave of foam packing peanuts, wearing purple Spandex cycling shorts, two pairs of glasses, and a backward Dick Cheney mask; *Pasquale Paoli* bundled head to toe in a moving blanket – people dressed like this would be bashed in some states. There is a point beyond which sculptural properties of material, form, and structure disperse into more hysterical outbreaks of style and vernacular reference, and this is the very point around which the best Harrisons tend to both blossom and congeal. Between disguise and sculpture is a world where people like Jack Smith and Leigh Bowery come alive. This is the theater that Michael Fried once accused Minimalism of, except here it becomes a shamelessly and intensely sculptural force, as do other modern realities—shopping, reading magazines, wigs, and other modern realities. And if Harrison's sculpture is so caught up in this chaos of signs and surface effects it's precisely because it's so serious about space: in a time when space and image lose their distinction, and the old, ideal distance between viewer and object is always already filled up and occupied

by a thousand communications, sculpture, too, finds ways of making itself multisurfaced and schizo-temporal. In order to re-occupy our contemporary no-space, it trades in its timeless pose for a temporary one, or for a manic series of appearances.

Everything Must Go

I remember in wood-working class
making a magazine rack.

Joe Brainard

Harrison has often appropriated commercial display systems, from magazine racks and mannequins to video screens and shelves, and many of her works assault the viewer's attention with the same gimmicks any 99-cent store uses to promote discounted merchandise: Everything Must Go! Often the merchandise itself appears readymade in a sculptural set-up: a work both displays and consists of a can of Slim Fast, employing it as both content and material; or a stack of glossy celebrity tabloids shoved under one corner of a plinth intervenes as both pop cultural reference and as a structural element that literally gets under the feet of the sculpture, shifting its weight. We could easily discuss such instances as a critique of consumer society and the marketing of urban life, but we can also approach them in a more direct, de-sublimated way: as active sculptural facts with real sculptural consequences. In a riot, for example, things are transformed in the act of their spontaneous displacement.⁶ Automobiles, street signs, and other objects are torn from their normal functions, as well as from their normal meanings, and suddenly literalized as obstacles or projectiles in urban space. This is how gesture converts signs back into raw materials. In a riot and a sculpture, such tactical acts of re-appropriation alter the circulation of bodies and information within a given terrain, if only momentarily.

When sculpture opens itself up to other activities, such as photography or window-shopping, and becomes a sort of switching station where cultural materials and meanings are violently disconnected and recombined, it puts itself into flux too. These are trans-sculptural complexes, perverse and sometimes manic

redistributions of the sensible world. A readymade object or image – Slim Fast or Leonardo DiCaprio – is never fully integrated into a Harrison; it always retains a degree of material autonomy and non-belonging, and is for this reason a means by which the sculpture willfully produces an internal self-differentiation.⁷ The sculpture claims Slim Fast as a component, but in so doing immediately relinquishes its own proper status and territory. Harrison's complexes recall Marcel Broodthaers's first sculptural work, *Pense-Bête* (1964), produced by the artist sinking volumes of his own poetry into a lump of wet plaster. Announcing his career shift from poet to visual artist, Broodthaers's simple gesture made his books unreadable by transforming them into sculptural objects: the only way to get at the poems now would be to demolish the artwork.⁸ But unlike the Broodthaers, a Harrison allows its readymades to be as readable as they are on the supermarket shelf, and in fact this readability (and sometimes the shelf too) is one of the sculpture's unavoidable and defining qualities. The work not only includes the can of Slim Fast, it reroutes and pirates all the communicability that comes built into its design. With the cylindrical form and the gloss of the packaging come the information on its surface, the social and cultural connotations of the diet beverage, as well as the historical memory and subjective associations that accompany such products, and we realize that there is no way to identify what is specifically sculptural in a Harrison without taking all of this into account too. These works are as heterogeneous and self-differing as *Pense-Bête*, but they perform their heterogeneity in a wide-open, even exhibitionistic manner. And if they at the same time remain hermetic or opaque, this is a paradoxical result of their extroversion.

Totem and tattoo

In a vain attempt
to keep it looking bright and festive,
local shop owners have taken
to spray-painting colored polka dots on it.

Mike Kelley



Bildunterschrift fehlt noch
 Mike Kelley
 Framed and Frame
 1999
 Installation view of Framed.
 Mixed media. 131 x 161 x 191"
 Magasin, C.N.A.C, Grenoble.
 Photograph by André Morin.

Returning to the relation between Harrison's forms and the paint-jobs they've been subjected to, another prototype comes to mind: *Framed & Frame* (1999), Mike Kelley's spray-painted, faux concrete reproduction of the "Chinatown Wishing Well" in Los Angeles.⁹ In this work, Kelley explores the potential for visual confusion in the haphazard "tinting" of a given form or image. Looking at poorly colorized vintage postcards of kitsch tourist attractions such as caves and rock formations, he pursues a "confused 'nothing' space" whose erotic charge he relates both to gender slippage and to the threat of the *informe*. In the same way that Kelley locates possibilities of cultural mixing and social subversion in an aesthetics of instability and chaos, Harrison elaborates similar proposals in terms of contemporary design-and-display culture.¹⁰ Because while commercial design succeeds by dissolving any clear frontier between a product and its packaging, between substance and image, Harrison's sculptures build themselves around the hijacking or occupation of such frontiers, opening troublesome gaps and causing the work to stammer in the very places where display and communication occur. A readymade mannequin, for example, becomes a radically undecidable figure in a sculptural complex such as *R. W. Fassbinder*. It is both figure, in the traditional sculptural sense, and figured display, or mediation figured as such. There is no way to nail its function down in specifically sculptural terms. And by giving it two faces - male and female, plaster and rubber, backward and forward - Harrison creates an immediate confusion between the space of retail and the space of subjective construction. This is also the biopolitical space of self-help and cosmetic surgery, but squatted and travestied. The gender confusion in this work comes *packaged* with the sculpture's formal and aesthetic undecidability, and where it dysfunctions or dis-identifies is precisely at the points - subjective and sculptural - where commercial design normally produces the illusion of a coherent, seamless experience. Harrison's are divided selves, and anything vertical or solid in them is founded on these desubjectivizing faults and interruptions.

Sculpture goes for a walk

Forming a horizon line behind the vertical forest of columns and figures is *Voyage of the Beagle*, Harrison's series of 57 digital photographs. A row read horizontally from left to right and back again, these ink-jetted *headshots* are taken from mannequins, menhirs, bronzes, Brancusi, hunting trophies, posters, record covers, and magazines. Beginning and ending with close-ups of Corsican menhirs, the series, like the voyage it was named after, is a sort of quest for the origins of sculpture, but in this case a comically circular one. The menhirs - whose erections have perhaps been overly stressed above - are now put on equal footing with a Buddha-like statue of Gertrude Stein and a stuffed porcupine, and Harrison's democratic and horizontal photographic embrace takes in many others too: Stryfoam wig displays, Kevin Bacon, a detail of a Giacometti, Beyoncé, etc. Sculpture, it seems, begins and ends everywhere: in the park, the street, shop windows, yard sales, magazines, the Internet, etc. And the lateral arrangement of these images reminds us that standing up is only one possible trajectory for a work that is sculptural. Another takes the form of a *walk*, as the artist - a sort of bee in this garden of forms - goes camera in hand through everyday life, collecting sculptures wherever they turn up. If elsewhere in Harrison's work the photograph is put into play as sculptural material, here it continues its work by other means. To produce sculpture is sometimes merely to notice it, to find it, and usually not in the museum.

I remember digging around
 in ice cold water
 for an orange soda pop.

I remember Belmondo's bare ass
 (a movie "first") in a terrible "art" movie
 called, I think, "Leda."

I remember a lot of
 movie star nose job rumors.

Joe Brainard



Bildunterschrift fehlt noch
Mike Kelley
Framed and Frame
1999
Installation view of Framed.
Mixed media. 131 x 161 x 191"
Magasin, C.N.A.C, Grenoble.
Photograph by André Morin.

With photography come stars. Harrison has appropriated images of celebrities many times before (Liz, Marilyn, Mel, etc.), putting her sculptures into awkward conversations not only with photography but with People who can be consumed and known only as ready-mediated, as industrial productions, and usually as endorsers of other industrial products such as canned iced tea. Athletes and movie stars join Harrison in her work not only as material but as muses and models. It is an uncertain, wide-open space between *Star* magazine and the artist's studio, and what better guides than these human commodities and proper names who move with such ease between the bedroom and the cover of a tabloid? Most fans would agree that Michael Jackson is one of the greatest living artworks of our time, at least since Warhol (or King Ludwig II, even). And then there is O.J., who like M.J. is connected (rightly or wrongly) to gloves, knives, and sex crimes. Both have endured the brightest, harshest spotlights, and neither has ever failed us, as stars or as works. Appropriated as the title of Harrison's last exhibition in New York, Simpson's "If I Did It" could even be an aesthetic slogan for artists today: a perfect articulation of the uncertain relation between producer and product at a time when artists, too, come readymade. Among other things, what the celebrity teaches the sculpture is that sometimes the most effective way to show up is by falling apart, or at least to involve the viewer in this dramatic and aesthetic possibility. And there is also the lesson about public and private, the two faces, and how to put in an appearance without giving yourself away. But the most captivating celebrities are the ones who keep us fixated on the moment of crisis where these two faces might finally collapse into one. Scandal and damage control are also sculptural possibilities, as is the "I want to be alone" of certain Harrisons who never stop seeming to turn their backs on us.

If the celebrity is a model for a way of showing up in the gallery and the marketplace, sculpture itself—like certain popular women's magazines—proposes models for a contemporary politics and aesthetics of the self. Is there any possibility of re-appropriating lifestyle culture as a means of subjective emancipation? Can readymade, biopolitical notions of the Self be pirated and transformed into techniques we might actually use? Is there,

on the most basic level, any way to *experience* a program that already includes us in its function? The politics of sculpture is about how it puts itself together before our eyes. It's in the way it can simultaneously occupy and abandon the place it stands in, and the ruses by which it opens up spaces of uncertainty between the materials it appropriates and the uses these come programmed with, that a complex such as *R.W. Fassbinder* or *Alexander the Great* becomes an instance of politics. *Police* means telling us what sculpture is; politics re-opens the question or refuses to answer it in just one way. This is why, when the Harrisons stand up in their places, they do so *improperly* and find their properties wherever, in whatever context. Jacques Rancière has defined politics as the formation of a subject around two contradictory terms: active and passive. In other words, when the agent of an action is also and immediately the material that is transformed by this action, there is politics.¹¹ Sculpture, then, when it becomes political, is a specific relation between ways of putting things together and of taking itself apart. There is always one more component, and it could be anything – a can, a wig, a video, a vacation—that shows up to antagonize the idea that sculpture is what it is, that it could ever be complete or self-identical. Sculpture starts again from its own contradictions. It stands up to get a better view of what's already been left behind.

Notes

1. Leiris opposes an idea of sculpture to, for example, the cannon, "which is a hole encircled by bronze." Michel Leiris, "Stones for a Possible Alberto Giacometti," in *Brisées: Broken Branches*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989, p. 137 (First Edition: 1978).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
3. All Joe Brainard citations from Joe Brainard, *I Remember*, New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
4. The artist Mike Kelley has written on the relation between aesthetics and gender confusion in pop and avant-garde culture. Mike Kelley, "Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre", in: *Foul Perfection*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, pp. 100-120 (First Edition: 1999).
5. Darian Leader and Judy Groves, *Introducing Lacan*, New York: Totem Books, 1996, p. 90.
6. On the poetics of barricade construction during the Paris Commune, see: Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
7. Rosalind Krauss writes on the self-differing, heterogeneous aspects of Broodthaers's work. Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage On the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1999. See: Dieter Schwarz, "Look! Books in plaster!", in: *October*, Vol. 42, 1987, pp. 57-66.
9. For a statement on his work *Framed & Frame (Miniature Reproduction "Chinatown Wishing Well" Built by Mike Kelley after "Miniature Reproduction 'Seven Star Cavern' Built by Prof. H.K. Lu")* see: Mike Kelley, "The Meaning Is Confused Spatially, Framed", in: *Minor Histories*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004 (First Edition: 1999). In this text, Kelley also discusses works based on a menhir-like, pre-Christian megalith in Denmark.
10. Foster considers how what was once called sculpture's "expanded field" has imploded in recent years, to the point where contemporary installation art is indistinguishable from the production of controlled, corporate space. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime*, New York: Verso, 2003, pp. 126-127.
11. Jacques Rancière, *Aux bords du politique*, Paris: Fabrique-Éditions, 1998.