

## Urban Objects: The Sculpture of Bettina Pousttchi

Jeremy Strick

In mid-2014, visitors to the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas encountered a novel and surprising work of art. The floor of the gallery that normally housed selections from the Nasher's permanent collection was covered with black rubber matting, a surface that resembled the asphalt blacktop that typically covers roadways. Across this surface were painted broken white lines and arrows, indicating traffic lanes and directions. Floor-to-ceiling windows at either end of the gallery were covered with a vinyl film, transparent in part, in other parts lined in black, in a pattern derived from photographs of the scissor gates used to barricade garages. On the blacktop floor sat sculptures from the Nasher's famed collection, including works by Rodin, Brancusi, Picasso, Matisse, and Giacometti.

This installation, titled *Drive Thru Museum*, was conceived by Bettina Pousttchi as a kind of triple homage—to the very American phenomenon of the drive-through, to the history of the site occupied by the Nasher (formerly a parking lot, across the street from Dallas's former "Automobile Row"—a string of automobile dealerships and garages), and to the masterworks of the Nasher Collection, recontextualized but nonetheless powerful in this unaccustomed setting. Into this installation Nasher chief curator Jed Morse inserted one of Pousttchi's own works, a *Double Monument for Flavin and Tatlin*. Outside the gallery, on the adjacent terrace, was placed another *Double Monument*, as well as several of Pousttchi's twisting, powder-coated *Squeezer* sculptures, which are made out of street bollards.

While artist-curated collection installations have become a fairly common and frequently successful trope of museum display, Pousttchi's *Drive Thru Museum* was rather more radical than the norm, both in the extent of her intervention and in the scope of her intention. Physically, *Drive Thru Museum* recalled somewhat John Baldessari's installation of a Magritte retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, for which he installed carpeting with images of a sky with clouds, derived from a Magritte painting, and dressed the museum guards in bowler hats. But *Drive Thru Museum* was not a re-presentation of the Nasher Collection from the artist's perspective or, exactly, an intervention within that collection. Rather, it was an entirely new work, one in which sculptures from the Nasher Collection maintained their full independence and integrity, while offering an altered way of seeing and experiencing those sculptures.

This seems at the very heart of Pousttchi's practice. Jasper Johns famously jotted in a sketchbook: "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it." Pousttchi builds on that precept, seeing latent possibilities in things, places, and situations, and bringing those possibilities forward to create something new, which nevertheless speaks to what was. Hers is an art where curiosity and imagination cross with research

and deft manipulation, wherein the complex meanings of objects, places, and situations become a field for the artist's action.

Pousttchi's bollard sculptures are representative of her approach. Humble, utilitarian bollards are most frequently noticed when they block our way, serving as barriers for vehicles or minor obstructions for pedestrians. Pousttchi's bollards attract our attention for different reasons. In pairs or small groups, their surfaces glistening with reflective powder coating, they bend and twist, touch and embrace. They are stiff metal objects, clearly subjected to great physical force, but they also seem to be subjects, endowed with affect and personality, actors with a will, interacting with one another and their environment. The bollards have a vegetal quality—reeds, swaying in the wind, or the forms of life discovered in deep-sea vents. They can suggest groups of people or abstracted versions of artworks. Does *Oskar* remind us of Matisse's *La Danse*? Does *Martha* call to mind the *Laocoön*? But if we see such references, it only underscores the humor in these works, the cool, observant wit inherent in so much of Pousttchi's art.

That wit is apparent in Pousttchi's striking *Double Monuments for Flavin and Tatlin*. Drawing, like the *Squeezers*, on a humble form of street furniture, the *Double Monuments* are explicit in their twinned art-historical references. But while Dan Flavin's *Monuments for V. Tatlin* celebrate the utopian spirit of the Constructivist master, Pousttchi's *Double Monuments* are rather more ambivalent about the utopian project. The street barriers that, along with neon tubes, compose these works are, after all, designed for crowd control. And while their bent and spiraling forms—the seemingly precarious tilting of the barriers, listing side to side as they spiral around—result from machine force, they suggest the piling up of these objects during street actions. Is this utopian release or dystopian anarchy? Inserted into these forms, the bright neon tubes (which in Flavin's fluorescent *Monuments* are rigorous in the order and symmetry of their placement) seem almost casually situated as they lean against the interiors of the spiraling barriers, and the twisting street barriers of the barricades foster the illusion that the neon tubes, rising up from the ground, are themselves bent at several points.

Pousttchi's most recent bodies of sculptural work involve a material quite distinct from the high-tech digital media and photo transfer that so much of her work has engaged. In 2013, she began working in ceramic, among the most ancient of sculptural materials, and one with special relevance to Berlin, where the artist now makes her home. Berlin is in considerable part a city of brick; the city's official and vernacular architecture of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is constructed of brick produced locally, in northern Germany. Large-scale manufacture of ceramic brick and tile was made possible in the eighteenth century by the invention of special round ovens, capable of firing large quantities of tile at high and even heat. The great Prussian architect and urban planner Karl Friedrich Schinkel relied heavily on brick as he expanded the city at the end of the eighteenth century and raised many of its civic monuments.

Pousttchi thought more deeply about the history and significance of brick architecture when she visited the city of Stralsund, on Germany's northern coast. The historic center of Stralsund is an ensemble of brick architecture, and the city is famed for the brick Gothic of its cathedral and other buildings. Following her visit, Pousttchi found in Berlin a factory that still used a nineteenth-century round oven and that employed technicians willing to assist the artist in creating two bodies of work. The first of these, titled *Framework*, involves individual repeating ceramic modules, wall mounted and aligned in multiple rows. The fired ceramics are gray and covered with a clear glazing that turns, depending on ambient light and the angle of reflection, white or silver. Those familiar with Pousttchi's work will recognize the form that each module takes: this is the motif she found on medieval German timber-frame houses, which became the basis for the photographic works she produced to cover the facade of Frankfurt's Schirn Kunsthalle. The motif also suggests Middle Eastern sources, and the amalgamation bears obvious personal resonance for the artist.

In their linear placement, these wall-mounted sculptures recall the *Progressions* of Donald Judd. Even more, as groupings of nearly identical modules placed in a serial, nonhierarchical order, they call to mind the floor pieces of Carl Andre. Pousttchi, however, gives her own twist to these associations with the masters of high Minimalism. Rather than grouping units of abstract form, she employs modules derived from—and referring to—decorative motifs associated with historic German vernacular architecture and Islamic design. And while Judd and Andre worked with sculptural elements that were decidedly and determinedly impersonal, Pousttchi's modules call forth a variety of cultural, historical, and autobiographical associations.

Just as these works invoke and subvert Minimalist tropes, so, too, the *Framework* series confounds artistic categories. These are sculptures, certainly, but they are also architectural elements. Produced by a technology of the building trades and derived from a decorative architectural motif, they are, nonetheless, displayed in the manner of fine art. One can imagine them installed not on gallery or museum walls, but rather inserted into a building facade, a striking decorative element, perhaps, or a relatively unobtrusive element of a larger, more complex design. It's not that Pousttchi has adopted the strategy of the readymade, taking a common artifact made of a common material and recontextualizing it as art. Rather, she has made something new, distinctly her own, of no clear practical purpose, which differs only in the intention of its making from any number of anonymous building artifacts. It is that twisting intentionality that Pousttchi displays on gallery walls, along with objects of simple and striking beauty.

In her second ceramic series, which now consists of a number of works, including the sculptural installation *Plano Piloto*, Pousttchi turns the viewer's attention from wall to tabletop, with small brick forms in the shape of houses, placed together in configurations that might suggest early human settlements or, in other instances, city blocks. Her material of choice in this instance is red brick—a material traditionally used in countless northern German buildings. And the brick here is not of Pousttchi's design. Rather, she employs ceramic blocks that are hollow at their core and come to a

pointed, roof-like shape on one side. These are normally used to provide a modest decorative fillip to courses of brickwork—tops of facades, edging around windows, and the like. The “roofs” of these traditional red bricks are covered with a darker glaze that extends partway down the ends of each brick. The effect is something like that of a thatched roof.

Adopting the tabletop format is an interesting move for Pousttchi. Placing objects on a wall automatically makes them “art,” a status with which she plays in the *Framework* series. By contrast, for the *Squeezers* and *Double Monuments*, Pousttchi takes real objects that, manipulated and altered, are then placed in contexts not far removed from those for which their unaltered versions were intended. These sculptures still do the work of redirecting our movement for which bollards and barricades were originally designed. The tabletop is not necessarily a fictive “art” space, nor is it necessarily “real.” The table serves equally as a surface for placing objects intended for practical use and as a surface for display. Pousttchi’s brick houses could conceivably be construed as either: models set up in an urban-planning project or sculptures arranged for display.

The tabletop format occupies a distinctive place in the history of modern sculpture. Throughout sculpture’s history, small objects—figures, mostly—have found their place of display on tables of varying heights. In many instances, the tabletop pieces are smaller versions of works that might be produced at larger scale. Typically, these sculptures include their own base, allowing their fundamentally fictive relation to the viewer to remain unchanged across a range of scales. That is, although sculptures might vary considerably in size and place of display, their ontological status wouldn’t change.

When Brancusi made *The Kiss* without a base, he allowed that ontological status to shift. Giacometti, with his tabletop sculptures, made that idea more explicit, with sculptures that resemble game boards, with pieces that the viewer (or player) might physically manipulate. The notion of sculpture occupying the literal space of the viewer, as opposed to a fictive space of art, was, of course, central to Minimal art. But that notion had significant antecedents, one of which was modernist tabletop sculpture, and it is that antecedent Pousttchi takes up with her brick houses.

Although Pousttchi determines the placement of her brick houses on their steel platforms, that placement seems more provisional, less logically ordered, than the placement of ceramic elements in the *Framework* series. With the installation work *Plano Piloto*, for example, comprising multiple steel tables around which the viewer is invited to move, and atop of which sit groups of brick houses, Pousttchi explores the possibilities of varying configurations. The ordering of those configurations seems more playful than systematic, and that playfulness is reminiscent of the spirit of Giacometti’s game boards. The fact that each unit is, essentially, identical to the others gives to them a sense of interchangeability and, by consequence, changeability.

That latent suggestion in Pousttchi's tabletop works—that the objects are placed provisionally and might be reconfigured—gives to these works a status somewhere between the *Squeezers*, the *Double Monuments*, and the artist's wall-mounted works. While they do not redirect the viewer's movement, their own positioning seems to be (at least possibly, indeed easily) within the viewer's control. There is the possibility of physical interaction with these objects, which gives to them a physical charge.

Pousttchi's turn to ceramics for the *Framework* series and the brick house series is both timely and, like all of the artist's work, critically engaged. Ceramic, a medium traditionally undervalued in modernism, is experiencing a significant revival, with younger artists in the United States and Europe avidly exploring its expressive possibilities. At the same time, critics, collectors, and institutions are rediscovering midcareer and historical figures whose work in the medium has long been neglected. Pousttchi found inspiration in an exhibition she encountered in 2013 at the Nasher Sculpture Center, *Return to Earth: Ceramic Sculpture of Fontana, Melotti, Miró, Noguchi, and Picasso, 1943–1963*. One gallery in that show paired two artists who were close friends, but whose work in ceramics led in different directions. Lucio Fontana's early ceramic sculptures are wildly expressive, exploiting the medium's capacity for freedom, immediacy, and intense physicality. Approaches reminiscent of Fontana's can be found in the work of any number of contemporary artists, including Rosemarie Trockel, Arlene Shechet, and William J. O'Brien, to name a very few. This was the approach highlighted in an exhibition organized in 2010 by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay*, which surveyed this trend and traced it back to Fontana.

Fausto Melotti, by contrast, took a more architectural approach. Thinking of ceramics' long history as a building material, he made sculptures that took the form of small buildings, or portions of buildings. Importantly, he also developed ceramic tiles for use in actual buildings, producing commissions for interiors in Italy, New York, and Venezuela.

It's to the tradition of Melotti that Pousttchi's ceramic sculptures hark back, even though most of her contemporaries follow in Fontana's wake. But Pousttchi takes the ideas of Melotti at least one step further. While Melotti produced ceramic tiles for use within decorative ensembles, Pousttchi presents the ceramic units of the *Framework* series as independent works of art. And while Melotti used handmade brick-like elements in tandem with brick fragments to assemble miniature building-like structures, Pousttchi takes actual bricks, which can resemble buildings, and deploys them in a fashion that makes inescapable that resemblance.

Most significantly, perhaps, by using uniform, largely ready-made objects to form her compositions, Pousttchi reverses the common understanding of ceramic as the medium, par excellence, of personal expression. Her bricks are made possible by a technological innovation, albeit an innovation of the eighteenth century, and are at once industrially fabricated and handmade. They are, she has said, "traditional but

high-tech, like 3-D printing but with an archaic material.” They play with the history of ceramics and the history of modern and contemporary sculpture, making for a new and unstable fusion of sculpture and architecture.

Though Pousttchi works in a range of media, including sculpture, video, photography, and installation, her most public and prominent work involves the application of photographic film to architecture. Sometimes radical, sometimes subtle architectural transformations have been effected on a number of buildings, including the Nasher, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, the Temporäre Kunsthalle in Berlin, and, most recently, the Wolfsburg Castle. This last involves the draping of photo murals that had been erected over the castle facade as part of a restoration project. The photo murals carry images of ten of the world’s most famed skyscrapers (each the tallest in the world when it was built), set in a row and abutting.

The Wolfsburg photo murals create an odd illusion, a displaced vision of ultimate urbanism set in the bucolic park surrounding the castle. The frontality of the mural image offers a grand (if disconcertingly miniature) urban vista, reminiscent of Chicago’s famed “cliff,” seen from Grant Park, and views of the Manhattan skyline seen from Central Park. But the verdant park in which the castle is set is itself now something of an anachronistic illusion. Just behind it sits the main business of Wolfsburg, the enormous Volkswagen factory that, effectively, created the city. While Wolfsburg Castle dates back centuries, the city of Wolfsburg was only founded and built in 1938 to house Volkswagen’s workers, and originally named Stadt des KdF-Wagens bei Fallersleben (roughly translated as City of the KdF Car—as the VW Beetle was known in Germany—near Fallersleben). At the end of World War II, the city was renamed after the historic castle, in an effort to connect it to Germany’s ancient—rather than recent—past.

Skyscrapers are a key symbol of modernity, as is the automobile. If Wolfsburg Castle serves as a carefully preserved and protected reminder of Wolfsburg’s history—a history once called forth to remake the present—Pousttchi’s murals substitute a contrasting vision: the thrusting, industrial modernity that created Wolfsburg and that the city has in turn helped make possible. Pousttchi’s *City*, then, simultaneously disguises Wolfsburg Castle and reveals something about the castle’s site and the history of its purpose.

Pousttchi’s mural projects are grand, ambitious efforts. They reframe their subjects in ways similar to the *Squeezers* and the *Double Monuments*, but at the scale of cities and addressing the sweep of history. But even with these grand ambitions, almost all of Pousttchi’s work is characterized by a distinctive lightness of touch, a sense of humor that brings smiles to the faces of her viewers, even as they grapple with the challenges and conundrums her works present.

When visitors entered the *Drive Thru Museum* at the Nasher Sculpture Center, their faces typically first showed surprise, confusion, even consternation. Quickly, those expressions turned to smiles of recognition and then delight, as the visitors came to understand the nature of the space they had entered, and the significance of Pousttchi's modifications. Some walked through the gallery, closely following the artist's traffic lanes. Others crossed the painted white lines, feeling uncomfortable yet proudly rebellious in their transgression. And for some, who walked along the carefully delineated lanes, a kind of kinesthetic experience opened up, as they gazed on sculptures usually experienced from a single static vantage, or perhaps a series of vantages, and saw them for the first time from a moving perspective—a continuum of changing views rather than a succession of single views. Something similar occurs with all of Pousttchi's work, as she brings forth the possibilities present, latent, or repressed in things and places. These possibilities are presented as consistent, not as alternatives—not binaries, pairs of twinned opposites, but as fields of meaning full of potential. Her works are generous invitations to serious consideration that resolve in the curious pleasure of a destabilizing humor.

From: Bettina Pousttchi: *The City*; Nasher Sculpture Center; Städtische Galerie Wolfsburg; Hatje Cantz publishers; Ostfildern; 2015; p. 75-81