

Time and Space: Bettina Pousttchi's Sculpture

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From summer 2016 to spring 2017, Bettina Pousttchi exhibited her *World Time Clock* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. The setting for this work could not have been more appropriate. As the Hirshhorn noted, it was at the International Meridian Conference, held in Washington in 1884, that agreement was reached on a single Prime Meridian, which became the basis for the international system of time zones pointed to in *World Time Clock*. Moreover, the Hirshhorn's architecture was uniquely suited to the display of Pousttchi's twenty-four part series. Designed by Gordon Bunshaft, the museum takes the form of a concrete cylinder surrounding a circular interior courtyard. Think of the building as a donut.

World Time Clock was on view on an upper floor of the Hirshhorn, its twenty-four panels hung on an interior wall that ran the circumference of the building. To see *World Time Clock*, one circumnavigated the building, just as Pousttchi effectively circumnavigated the globe, traveling to twenty-four cities, each in a different time zone, to photograph the twenty-four public clocks that form the subject of her work.

No doubt, *World Time Clock* addresses the notion of time, its apparently simple representation, and its slippery subjectivity; its status as a construct and an experience. At the Hirshhorn, however, it became clear that the work is as much about movement as it is about time, since to view the work one moved in a circle around the building, pausing in front of each panel, and in so doing effectively looking up toward the sky from different vantage points. Circling the Hirshhorn to view the work encouraged an imaginary traversal of the earth's circumference.

One wouldn't call *World Time Clock* a sculpture, but it nonetheless suggests something essential to sculpture, and Pousttchi's work in that art form in particular. The experience of sculpture requires movement, and movement occurs over time. Think of sculpture as the original time-based art form.

That interplay between sculpture, movement, and time was explicitly pointed to in Pousttchi's 2014 installation for the Nasher Sculpture Center, *Drive Thru Museum*. Recalling that the site occupied by the Nasher was once a parking lot, she imagined one of the museum's galleries as a street, covering the floor with black rubber matting painted with broken white lines and arrow representing traffic lanes and directional signs. Between these lanes Pousttchi placed works from the Nasher's collection—sculptures by Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, among others—as well as one of her own works, a *Double Monument for Flavin and Tatlin*.

Entering *Drive Thru Museum*, one could admire the work's conceptual brilliance along with its cheeky reframing of familiar masterworks. Arguably, however, the installation's most profound experience was kinesthetic. Often we experience a sculpture by moving around it, observing it from several or all sides. With our attention focused on the sculpture, we may be less aware of our own movement; on the connection between our bodies and the object of our observation. By encouraging us to imagine ourselves as viewing the sculptures in *Drive Thru Museum* from the interior of a (slowly) moving vehicle, Pousttchi's installation heightened our awareness of our own motion, and of the shifting, dynamic relationship between subject and object.

Over more than a decade, Pousttchi has produced various bodies of sculptural work. These include freestanding objects made of bent, painted metal, and ceramic tabletop works and wall-mounted reliefs. Like *World Time Clock* and *Drive Thru Museum*, certain of these works encourage and reward ambulation. Others—notably the ceramics—reframe function and context in such a way as to force a shift in the viewer's perspective. It would seem a goal of all of her sculpture to generate a self-aware subjectivity.

Pousttchi's two earliest bodies of work are made of repurposed, manipulated street furniture: metal bollards and pedestrian barriers. Pousttchi places these humble objects in a metal press where—subjected to enormous pressure—they are bent, twisted, and crushed, after which they may be powder-coated or polished, acquiring new forms and significance. They engage in a witty and provocative dialogue with two of the foundational sculptural approaches of the twentieth century: Minimalism and the readymade.

As with Marcel Duchamp's readymades, the bollards and barriers derive from familiar, mass-produced objects. These objects are recontextualized, shifted from banal functionality to the complex, liminal status of artworks. In a bow to Minimal sculpture, the bollards and barriers involve unitary, uniform objects or groupings of objects, manufactured through industrial processes with industrial materials. Departing from both Minimalism and the readymade, however, Pousttchi reshapes these industrial objects, preserving their original identity while calling forth from them dense arrays of reference, allusion, and association.

Arrayed in pairs or in larger groups, the bollards might evoke windswept reeds, lovers kissing, or soldiers, fallen in a heap. One group reminds us of Matisse's painting *La Danse* (1910); another calls to mind the *Laocoon*. Through Pousttchi's reforming, the once uniform, inexpressive bollards acquire personality; they radiate humor or pathos, weariness, wariness, defensiveness, and aggression.

Just as the bollards bend and twist, the character and import of their posture changes—sometimes markedly—as the viewer moves around them. To understand these forms—in space and relative one to the other—we shift our perspective, and in so doing the forms acquire new meaning. Pousttchi adopts the language of Minimalist seriality and effectively turns that language on its head.

Minimalism, the art historian Anna Chave has argued, adopts a language of authority and power. In light of that thesis, it's interesting to note that both the bollards and the barriers begin with objects designed for control, a purpose that Pousttchi's manipulations undercut or even defeat. With the evocatively titled series *Blackout*, for example, austere barriers are reshaped, becoming tangles of lines and forms that suggest, in one instance and from one vantage point a chaise lounge; in another a drum set or, alternatively, the chocolate grinder from Duchamp's *Large Glass*; in another a demented crib. Indeed, the criss-crossing lines and piled, morphing forms generate such cascading associations that in their open-endedness they may propose the anarchy that these barriers were originally designed to repress.

If Pousttchi's approach indicates a negation of certain Minimalist precepts, it also suggests reconsideration of another movement central to the history of modernism, an approach to abstract sculpture that Minimalism rejected: Constructivism. As with Constructivist sculpture, much of Pousttchi's work in three dimensions is impossible fully to apprehend from a single viewpoint. Like Constructivist sculpture, Pousttchi's works are not singular forms or groupings of identical forms. They are comprised of distinct parts or pieces, which together constitute a single work, the constituent elements of which remain discernible.

These qualities are present in Pousttchi's three recent series of metal sculptures. Each series is made of a different material. Works in one are made of highway protection barriers. Another is formed of bicycle racks, and a third uses tree protection barriers. Largest and paradoxically most delicate in appearance are the crash-barrier works, titled *Vertical Highways*, which are tall, twisting assemblages of painted metal. In addition to subjecting the barriers to the pressures of the metal press, Pousttchi turns them ninety degrees, so that the normally horizontal beams stand vertically. As much as any of Pousttchi's sculptures, these have a figurative character, evoking long legs in motion; running, skipping, dancing, as bodies lean, bend down, embrace.

Prior to the *Vertical Highways* and tree protection barrier series, Pousttchi produced metal sculptures in a fairly limited palette of industrial colors—powder-coated slate, white or black. The *Vertical Highways*, by contrast, are made in several colors—a bright red, a rust, and gray, while the tree protection barriers are painted in different shades of green. This move into color complements a particular lyricism of form. In contrast to the blunt shapes of the bollards and the bars and spikes of the pedestrian barriers, the forms of the crash barriers and tree protection barriers are elongated, delicate, and elegant.

While the works made from tree protection barriers share with the *Vertical Highways* a distinctly figurative quality, the bicycle racks have more the quality of abstract drawings. In this, they revive another formal notion developed in Constructivist sculpture; that of drawing in space. A Constructivist sculpture might define a space rather than fill it with mass. Certain artists who worked in the Constructivist tradition—Alexander Calder or David Smith, for example, extended that notion, producing works that appear as three-dimensional drawings or, rather, drawings in three dimensions. The bicycle racks, with their bending, twisting, intersecting lines, offer a novel application of the Constructivist principle.

Nowhere are Pousttchi's art-historical ambitions more clearly or complexly evident than in her series of *Double Monuments to Flavin and Tatlin*. In this series, white powder-coated barriers are bent into circles, one piled atop the other to form precariously balanced cones, into which are inserted fluorescent tubes that rest at an angle—and sometimes project from—the cones' interiors. Even without its title, the series' prime references would no doubt still be evident. The cones of piled-up pedestrian barriers call to mind the image of Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919–20), a work of sculpture and architecture that—despite the fact that it reached only the model stage—remains one of the most iconic and influential works in the modernist canon. The fluorescent tubes, of course, derive from Dan Flavin, the Minimal sculptor who made those tubes his primary material. The Flavin reference is, in fact, doubled, as among Flavin's most famed series are his thirty-nine “*monuments*” for V. Tatlin (1964–90), configurations of white fluorescent tubes named in honor of the Russian Constructivist. While the visual and titular references to Tatlin and Flavin dominate, the *Double Monuments* also recall the form of Duchamp's famed *Bottle Rack* (1914), in turn suggesting the import of the readymade both to Minimalism and to Pousttchi.

So rich in allusion and reference are the *Double Monuments* that they can be seen as a meditation—a double meditation—on modernist sculpture and the utopian project. In this reframing, Tatlin's charged, heroic language—a proposition for the glorious future of art and society—is turned into something more tenuous and ambivalent. As they do in Tatlin's *Monument*, Pousttchi's circling forms reach to the sky—albeit they are considerably smaller even than Tatlin's model. Instead of Tatlin's complex if rational geometries, Pousttchi gives us forms that seem provisional in their placement, teetering drunkenly one atop the other. And while the fluorescent tubes that comprise Flavin's “*monuments*” are mounted to the wall in ordered rows, creating images of static perfection, the single tubes in Pousttchi's *Double Monuments* rest at such angles that perception of their position and direction changes as one moves about them.

In 2014, Pousttchi began working in a new medium, ceramics. Rather than pursuing the gestural, expressive possibilities of the medium so much at the center of the ceramics revival of the last decade, Pousttchi adopted a more restrained and historicizing approach. In the spirit of Minimalism, her ceramic sculptures embrace seriality and industrial process while, in contradistinction to Minimalism, she sets her work within a social and historical conversation rich in reference and association.

To fabricate her ceramic sculptures, Pousttchi turned to a Berlin factory that still manufactures bricks and ceramic tile in a nineteenth-century round oven. For one of the series, *Frameworks*, she adapted a façade element from timber-framed houses (a motif she had also used in some of her photo-based works). For a second series, *Plano Piloto*, she adopted a type of ceramic block that is used to provide a finish to courses of brickwork—window edging, tops of façades, and so forth. The individual blocks come to a pointed, rooflike shape on the side on which they are glazed.

The *Frameworks* are wall-mounted in groupings of varying configuration. Striking as they are, their status is ambiguous. They are works of art, certainly, but they appear as if they might be arrangements of manufactured found objects, which

they are not. Glazed ceramics, mounted to a wall, call to mind museum displays of Middle Eastern art, and the derivation of this motif, which Pousttchi found in German medieval architecture, traces back to Persian culture; a reference to the artist's own dual heritage.

Set on stainless steel platforms, the individual blocks that comprise works in the *Plano Piloto* series resemble miniature houses. Especially because the platforms on which they sit are in many cases set just above the floor, these objects call to mind the houses of Joel Shapiro, works that first established that artist's reputation as a leading Post-Minimalist. But while many crucial features differentiate Pousttchi's works from those of Shapiro, two seem especially pertinent. Whereas Shapiro, in line with Minimalist practice, placed his houses directly on the floor, Pousttchi puts hers on platforms. And while Shapiro's houses are singular objects, Pousttchi assembles hers into groups.

In placing these groups of objects on platforms, Pousttchi recalls a sculptural tradition that precedes yet anticipates Minimalism: the tabletop sculpture. Brancusi's *The Kiss* (1907) offers an important early example of this tradition; a sculptural object placed not on a pedestal, a space set off as if by parenthesis as the realm of art, not life, but rather directly on a table, the same space occupied by the viewer. Giacometti expanded that tradition with his tabletop sculptures, works that allude to game boards with pieces that could be manipulated; games that could be played if only one could understand the rules. Conceptually, the stainless steel platforms of the *Plano Piloto* series seem most related to the carved bases of Brancusi—they are not separate from the artwork, but integral to it. Set either close to the floor, or at multiple levels for a single work, they disrupt and activate our physical relationship to the sculptures, putting the proper relationship of our body to the work into question.

Grouping multiple ceramic "houses" onto single platforms, Pousttchi expands the representational field of these simple objects. The clusters of identical forms might suggest an urban planner's abstracted model for a village, or their sameness might imply plans for a suburban subdivision. Within the series, the varying numbers and placement of bricks from one work to another reflect different histories and narratives. At the same time, the change in status of the "houses" from ordinary building block to art objects situates this series within broader narratives of sliding signifiers and historical transformation.

Following the *Plano Piloto* series, Pousttchi expanded the vocabulary of the ceramic house form, employing larger bricks glazed on all sides, sometimes colored green, sometimes blue. The size and position of her platforms changed as well, and Pousttchi has exhibited some groupings of the ceramic bricks directly on the floor. While her use of uniform, industrially produced objects set on the floor recalls the work of Carl Andre, the evocative forms of these objects—both singularly and as brought together in different configurations—insinuate the ways in which abstract forms can acquire significance.

Throughout her sculptural oeuvre, whether in metal or ceramic, Pousttchi has continuously interrogated the ways in which her materials can speak—to history and the history of art, to our experiences of physical space and of time, to the ways in which meanings are constructed and simultaneously critiqued. Her works may

attract and intrigue, seduce, resist, or even repel, but in so doing they entangle us in a sense of complicity, our participation in the transformation of dull, common objects and simple forms into eloquent works of art that lock us in a referentially charged dance through time and space.