
STACKING/ RIGGING/ BINDING

10 Contemporary Sculptors



Washington Project for the Arts
Washington, D.C.

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Howard N. Fox

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Foreword

The Washington Project for the Arts is proud to present *Stacking/Rigging/Binding*, organized by Howard N. Fox, Assistant Curator for Exhibitions at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and a new WPA Board member.

This, the last exhibition of our 1979-80 season, is also a first in several ways. With the financial support of the National Endowment for the Arts program in the visual arts, we are initiating direct payments to artists who produce installation pieces in WPA galleries. This catalogue also marks a new commitment by the WPA Board of Directors to regularly produce documentary publications on the many significant exhibitions initiated in our space. This show also marks Howard Fox's first curatorial effort for the WPA and the beginning of what I hope will become a long association that will serve to strengthen and broaden our visual arts exhibition program.

Al Nodal
Director

Acknowledgments

In a city of national museums, the Washington Project for the Arts serves the special need of presenting new art by emerging or established artists in a diversified exhibition program which is international in scope. Its special responsibility in Washington has been reciprocated by many generous individuals and businesses throughout the community, some of whom have been instrumental in the realization of this exhibition. Special thanks are due to the following for their generous assistance: Mizell Lumber and Hardware Company, Kensington, Maryland, and Tart Lumber and Hardware Company, Arlington, Virginia, for the loan of material to several projects; John Tennant for photography; Rings-Leighton Partnership, Washington, D.C., for assistance with graphics and design; and The Writers Center, Glen Echo, Maryland, for printing of this catalogue. This exhibition and its catalogue owe much to their participation.

My personal appreciation also goes to all the people at WPA who helped produce this exhibition. I wish first of all to thank Director Al Nodal for the invitation to organize this show; it is especially gratifying to have been asked by a colleague whose own work I have so deeply admired. I also thank Assistant Director Olivia Georgia, the ever-industrious Michael McCall (who must run on nuclear power), and volunteer Ann Rosenthal for handling various aspects of the exhibition. Most of all, I must thank Joy Silverman who labored long hours coordinating every aspect of this exhibition and its numerous projects, all of which presented unique challenges, all of which she met resourcefully; she is, yes, a joy to work with, and I look forward to working with her again.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to say, as both a guest curator and a recently appointed member of the Board, how impressed I have been by the enthusiasm, efforts, and dedication of the entire staff of WPA: through the seasons their individual and collective contributions have become of immeasurable value not only to the WPA, but to the entire art community who they serve. I am proud to be associated with them.

H.N.F.

by Howard N. Fox
Guest Curator

The period from the mid-1970s to the present has been a transitional one, inspiring considerable controversy as sculptural interests have shifted from a preoccupation with the object as a thing in itself to an acknowledgment—indeed, sometimes an advocacy—of the object as a thing in this world, subject to conditions outside itself and informed by other “non-art” factors. This seems highly improbable, since throughout the twentieth century the most advanced modern artists had striven to establish art as a closed system, entire to itself, separate from external concerns, self-sufficient and self-reflexive. Artists and apologists from the Impressionists to Kasimir Malevich to Donald Judd sought to discern the laws of true and immutable art. Over and over they argued for an art that would obey the laws of its own nature and not those of, say, Renaissance perspective or academic taste.

One of the key concepts of modernism was the doctrine of material integrity—a belief, or perhaps a superstition, that materials have a specific nature which should govern their treatment. One correlative was that a particular material should not be made to imitate or substitute for another: plaster, for instance, should not be painted to look like marble or wood. Another was the belief that in art any material should be used in sympathy with these innate properties.

Recently, however, sculptors working in many different directions have taken a very different approach to materials that breaks with such modernist predilections. For example, they may appropriate materials not necessarily for their innate properties but sometimes use them in ways that disrupt or controvert their basic nature; or they may build structures whose stability is uncertain or whose material integrity is transitory. The ten sculptors in this exhibition use aggressive building methods such as stacking, compression, lashing, or other vigorous treatments, often forcing the materials to maintain unstable structures or to adopt mutable, temporary forms. In all, these artists are moving into an esthetic beyond modern concerns.

Renee Butler uses the sheerest of materials in her work—gauze, clear monofilament, muslin—sometimes

juxtaposed with cruder materials—fishing lugs, hardware, or other found objects. Her most extreme work consists of a length of cotton gauze tied at either end to hooks in the ceiling so that it forms a long sling that droops lazily to about a foot or so above the floor. This gossamer membrane is then nearly punished out of existence as a small boulder is placed into the sling, dragging it down to within inches of the floor and taxing the gauze to the very limit of its endurance. The contrast of the rough rock and the diaphanous gauze could not be more graphic. Most of Butler's works are less tortured, but the formative situation is usually the imposition of some condition—tugging, tearing, stretching—upon a sheer or fragile material.

The thrusting vertical towers omnipresent in **Arthur Weyhe's** sculptures suggest functional forms such as pylons, spires, or derricks. But these rangy, aspiring verticals are always weighted, tangled, or otherwise earthbound. The large but somewhat truncated piece (atypically short for Weyhe because, being indoors, its height was delimited by the overhead lighting fixtures) that he made for this exhibition is comprised of three wooden masts arranged tripodally to support three boom-like flanges which extend out horizontally. The white cedar timbers, hand-stripped of their bark, radiate a faint, silvery glint which is countered by the hefty black toggles and the elaborate block-and-tackle system that hoists everything into position. Weyhe's constructions always seem restrained or captive in their own corporeality, as if they were somehow trying to overcome their very material nature.

Patricia McLean assembles wooden dowels into intricate three-dimensional geometries which at once are caught in and serve to support attenuated webworks of cord, twine, or rope. These constructions are held together by the effects of gravity, as the weight of the wood structures pull the support webs into proper configuration. McLean's project for this exhibition is an environmental diptych, of sorts: two similar but unidentical suspended arrangements are set into the awkward spaces of the two long display windows that flank the entryway to WPA's storefront galleries. Suspended forms resembling rope bridges, rope

ladders, and trapezes converge from all corners of the display windows on a central point formed by a small metal ring that is caught in space by the very cordage which it encircles. In any McLean construction, every element is dependent on every other element, yet they do not generate a closed system, for the collective structure requires some external support to which to be anchored: it may hang from the ceiling, be slung between two walls, or be strung up in a tree, but it does require some external support body. McLean's constructions must always exist in some other frame of reference and are never self-contained.

The jerry-rigged constructions by Butler, Weyhe, and McLean all, in fact, allude to an outside frame of reference or extrinsic factors depending, as they do, on gravity, mass, placement, imposed events, or the physical features of the surrounding environment. Likewise, the process of stacking is an index of extrinsic factors. But stacking raises special considerations since each stacked element is evidence of the artist-builder's involvement, a reminder of realities which are now invisible and non-formal. There is furthermore a temporal aspect to stacking, for it is a record of gesture, a calendar of one event and one event; stacking implies the past as much as it exists in the present.

As a building method, stacking is especially appropriate to the evocations of the geological past in the imagery of **Jim Sanborn's** sculpture. Sanborn uses geological materials—rough-hewn slabs and random chunks of sandstone—precari­ously stacked up, one upon another, to depict geological subjects—b­uttes, mountains, valleys, and other formations of the earth's crust. The process is deeply suggestive of geological time—those aeons through which mountains are formed, stratum by stratum, and eroded away. The stacking recapitulates the sense of the passage of time in the viewer's awareness of the processes involved in quarrying the rock, planing down its flat edges, chipping it away to the intended formation, and ultimately of stacking the work, stone by weighty stone, into a tenuously balanced "critical mass" in which one stone more or less might upset the entire structure. In Sanborn's sculpture there is also a strong vertical thrust that impels the eye and the material upward; yet one always senses the downward drag of gravity in these pieces. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Butte-Valley-Butte* with its implied lava flows

percolating upward from its deepest recesses, or in *Lightning Mountain* with its zig-zagging groove and step-like arrangements that seem simultaneously to be climbing up and cascading down. Without the laborious and deliberate stacking that goes into them, these sculptures would be mere contours absent of all the energy and implied motion they contain, for, pictorial though they are, their essence transcends that which can be merely seen.

Loren Madsen is best known for his stunning brick constructions, sometimes weighing more than a ton and a half, suspended in mid-air by fine stainless steel wires. But he has also explored the possibilities of stacked structures, mainly in a few sculptures and proposals for works built from twelve-by-twelve inch timbers similar to railroad ties. The maquette included in this exhibition is a proposal for a thirty-foot diameter open spiral of progressively longer timbers, each leaning flush against the next like fallen dominoes, but steeply angled rather than hugging the ground. The shortest timber is perhaps one foot in length, the longest about fifteen feet, and each survives at its precise angle by sheer pressure from its neighbors and the strong pull of gravity; no other fastening is used. A dialectic between force and constraint, the spiral surges with visual and actual energy as it sweeps further skyward with each successive timber. Even in this diminutive model one can sense the heroic quality that characterizes Madsen's best work. His structures of raw materials always maintain their form with precision and elegance; they are the sculptural equivalent of grace under pressure.

Even though there is little or no motion in the works by these varied artists, such physical forces as tension, friction, gravity, and other kinds of stress are intensely active in them. Without that positive—though invisible—flow of energy throughout, these structures would collapse into so much material. Moreover, the viewer's knowledge of this is integral to a correct perception of these forms. This suggests that *true* form in art does not reside exclusively in the object and that there may be more to form than its visually perceived outward configuration, which is how form has generally been spoken of in modern art: indeed, it is possible, and perhaps preferable, to devise a more inclusive and accommodating definition of form. *Situation*, rather than material configuration, seems to be the most fertile approach to consider the *true* form of any work of

art—that is, not just the material by-product of the artist's sensibility, or what is termed the object, but rather the *condition* of the object (or any other artistic manifestation) from its creation by the artist to its perception by the viewer. Within the concept of situation true form would be regarded as a function, in part, of external phenomena including both incidental environmental factors and other less demonstrable actualities as the viewer's circumstance and engagement with the work. Situation includes all that is seen and all that is not seen; it includes all that may be readily perceived as well as that which changes and is ephemeral, and that which must be understood or deduced or learned; for situation also acknowledges the role of the viewer. Modernist aesthetics, vesting so much value in the object and how it looks, could not account for the bearing that situation and perception have upon the "fact" of an art object; yet it is these very aspects which have provided the richest area of exploration for many contemporary artists who, because the principles of their work are both after and beyond modernism, must be called post-modern.

If modernist ideas of materiality and objecthood are being challenged by post-modern art, that challenge carries over to other notions of pure form and especially to ideas about the relationship of the object to the world outside it. In a very real sense, modern art was an attempt to overcome the environment and, by extension, the world and its events. Malevich had said it, so have others: within the supremacy of *pure* art, "the contours of the objective world fade more and more and so it goes, step by step, until finally the world—'everything we loved and by which we have lived'—becomes lost to sight."¹ All those movements, those *prevailing* movements, of modern art—Impressionism, Cubism, Suprematism, Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Hard-edge, Color Field, Minimal, and others—that derived from an interest in purely plastic, formal elements, represent nothing less (or less heroic) than the attempt to overcome life itself. It is hardly a surprise that modern art should have invented a space to accommodate this impulse. The modern art gallery, what critic Brian O'Doherty has referred to as "the white cube,"¹² is a spare, empty room devoid of architecture, a neutralized environment, vapid and invisible as possible, whose purpose is to drop back, like darkness at the dawn, and

disclose the self-sufficient, self-possessed modern object. The modern gallery is not merely a pristine setting for a precious object but is a vanquished space, a non-place, creating a void around an aesthetic pronouncement. The truly modern art object has no intercourse with the world.

Many of the works in this exhibition, by contrast, are very much engaged by the environment, sometimes dependent on it, sometimes resistant to it, but always existing in tandem with it. They are rigged to hang from the ceiling, balanced or buttressed against the walls, or are stacked tenuously from the floor up. For instance, in **Patrick Mohr's** *Typhoon*, a virtual cyclone of bright red sailcloth, various-sized triangular jibs are rigged to the walls and floors by ropes, turnbuckles, and rope cleats. *Typhoon* is site-specific and "choreographed," as it were, around a steep open stairwell that emerges from below onto a mezzanine which is bedecked with an aluminum railing. Coming up the stairs one first sees three layers of red sails overhead; then, ascending to the mezzanine, at the floor level, where more sails and the elaborate and elegant system of lashing, turnbuckles, and coils that are the ensemble's moorings come into view; next, upon stepping onto the mezzanine, from within; and ultimately, after leaving the mezzanine, from a variety of new viewpoints. At no time or place is vision complete, for the arrangement is everywhere different, always partly obscured, so that *Typhoon* must be experienced episodically. Perception is as much involved here with comprehension and memory as it is with sight, occurring through time and throughout an environment.

Similarly, works by Bruce Chao and by Thomas Watcke refer and respond directly to their environments. **Bruce Chao's** work generally consists of large panes of glass suspended by ropes from the ceiling. Hooks are screwed into the ceiling at predetermined positions, then various lengths of rope are tied in turn to the hooks and to small C clamps grasping the corners of the glass panes. Usually Chao works in quite large spaces, and the panes are hung parallel to the floor or at an incline to it or vertically in successive "screens." The vast expanses of dense rows of glass create a quite dramatic, aggressive presence. For this exhibition, spaces were not so vast, and Chao selected a long, narrow gallery to produce a work that is very sheer, very sec: fifteen panes of waxed glass are hung

straight down in columns of three to create a fog-like curtain that divides the dimly-lit room. This most understated of Chao's works has radically altered the environment as much as it has been influenced by it.

Likewise, **Thomas Watcke** has created an environment within an environment while allowing his initial concept to be governed by the surroundings. A number of two-by-four inch beams are leaned at increasing angles against each other, the whole group propped against the wall; then a second set of two-by-fours is carefully wedged between the ceiling and the small exposed end surfaces of the first beams, thus forming a series of double buttresses that are locked into place, being force-fit between the floor and the ceiling. With an arrangement of six such groupings alternating from opposite walls, Watcke has managed to create a cathedral-like effect in a small, box-like room. In addition to such site-specific projects as this, Watcke also makes free-standing objects. At first glance they appear to be lattice-like networks of birch strips crisscrossing the interior of a box-like frame, but a closer examination reveals the network to be one continuous length of wood, sawed so that it opens out like an accordion; the opened form is sustained by the tension produced by small crossbeams force-fit into the sawed channels. In sawing incompletely through from opposite ends of a single square column of wood, Watcke takes the basic idea of the grid formation and extrudes it into a flexible, manipulable *event* in wood. By increasing or decreasing the tension the form itself changes. The impact of these works comes less from any final appearance than from our awareness that, minus the imposition of tension, the configuration we see would be different; that there is nothing inevitable about any aspect of the form that we do behold. It is as if, for some of these sculptors, form itself is understood to be variable and arbitrarily determined from time to time by factors extrinsic to the object.

Certainly a most dramatic response to the surrounding environment is **Nade Haley's** site-oriented temporary project, *Overture: G-Strings*—a ninety foot construction that Haley conceives as a drawing in space, rigged on guy wires above the outdoor Washington Art Site on the corner of 12th and G Streets, N.W. (whence comes the title's punning "G-strings"). Three expansive grilles constructed from long, parallel slats of wood bolted to little wooden interstices

undulate and course through the air. They do not appear simply to hover, though, as if magically defying gravity; rather, they are quite visibly supported by a network of steel cables, ligatures, and turnbuckles that snare the sections between the ground and the adjacent building to which the cables are attached. The whole is a broadly orchestrated display of tensile activity.³ In her smaller and self-contained indoor sculptures, Haley employs similarly athletic means. Working with steel six-inch square reinforcing grid, the same used to reinforce cast concrete in building and road construction, Haley builds pyramidal structures. Each face of these irregular pyramids is cut, with bolt cutters, from a flat expanse of grid and is joined to the other faces by a strenuous twisting or braiding of the cut ends. Apart from their visual interest as bold volumetric forms, these pyramids also function as supports for painted steel rods that zig-zag and ricochet through their interiors clutching the grid to create three-dimensional drawings. It is interesting that Haley sometimes displays these works variously on one side or another, implying that they have no fixed base, no absolute form. In a sense their form is optional and is suggested by, if not actually determined by, the environment—in this case by the floor.

Haley's appreciation of the grid as a plastic reality marks a curious and telling departure from the modernist conception of the grid as an absolute form as it was regarded throughout the twentieth century, culminating with the proliferation of grid-derived art during the 1960s and early '70s. Then, many artists (like Sol LeWitt, Will Insley, Mel Bochner, and countless others) saw the grid as a formative principle with its own laws and logic by which, or within which, they might organize their own work. For them the grid existed a priori, before and independent of the object whose form (and permutations) it delimited. The grid was conceived as an absolute form, predetermined and immutable; and any object was simply an aberration—mere gossip, so to speak—a function of the grid. But for Haley and many others working today the grid is seen as plasticity itself—malleable, susceptible to the artist's handling. Its form is not absolute but is an aspect of and module in some larger construct. Indeed, Haley prunes and shapes the grid (both the physical, steel grid that is her building material and the formal or ideal grid which it describes) and braids its loose ends

together forcing it to obey her designs rather than her yielding to its order. Nade Haley's grids, and those of Thomas Watcke, Jim Sanborn, and Loren Madsen, are a good deal more worldly than, say, Sol LeWitt's absolute ones or Piet Mondrian's pure geometries;⁴ the post-modern grid, like the constructions in which they are deployed, is contingent upon external decisions and non-formal factors. Ultimately it is remanded to the conditions—to the brute fact, as Sartre would call it—of this world.

Whether or not they use grids, all of these sculptors create works which displace any notion of absolute form, and all of the works discussed so far undertake in some way a de-definition of form (as it has been constituted by modernist aesthetics) and a de-objectification of sculpture. At root all of these works are ambiguous, tentative, elusive. None is more so than the labyrinth of stacked wood lath built for this exhibition by **Ed Mayer**. Like Sanborn or Mohr, Ed Mayer frequently evokes imagery in his work, particularly of architecture and dwellings, concerned, as he is, with the poetics of entries, portals, windows, passages, tunnels, and labyrinths. Like any abstract artist, Mayer strips away particulars to arrive at essentials, as in the architectonic forms just mentioned—generalized, simplified portals, and so forth. Yet, using the most plain materials—ordinary lath (narrow slats of unfinished wood as those used in snow fences or as a backing for plaster or stucco)—and the most elemental of building methods—stacking—he builds deceptively simple structures; deceptive, because Mayer manages to pack his work, abstracted though it is, with complexity and contradiction and irony. Nothing about the labyrinth is what is at first seems to be: its "gestalt," as a Minimal artist might be wont to speak of, is not presented all at once, but must be deciphered and slowly uncovered by a physical exploration of the piece. What at first seems readily apprehensible proves to be evasive, even eluding definition. A labyrinth is both a positive and a negative space—that is, a material structure and the absence of any material structure. There is a legitimate question in asking what its form is—the rib cage of wood lath, or the void through which that structure is disclosed. Compounding this challenge to definition is the fact that even the boundaries of the structure are indefinite. The entryway, for instance, commands the funnel of space around it,

and it is difficult to say where the piece "begins," or, since the labyrinth curls up deep within itself, where it ends. For that matter, even the inside/outside divisions are obscured—or, more correctly, not obscured but con-fused, for the spaces between the slats render the undifferentiated interior and exterior spaces visible simultaneously. Actually, the labyrinth consists of a single continuous wall of lath, and in fact there is no "inside" (or "outside") but merely the illusion of one. There is yet a further irony in the way in which the very small space in which the labyrinth is constructed is controverted by the surprisingly long distance the spiral encompasses; for there is much more space in the labyrinth than would be guessed and more than can be perceived visually. It is only by physically traversing the spiral that the full length can be experienced.

Even that "empirical" experience brings contradictions of its own. The act of entering any structure sets up a certain behavior and set of expectations including a curiosity in exploration, the sensation of being enclosed, and the anticipation of arriving at some destination; in exiting, however, even though one encounters the same materials and the same forms, the experience is altogether different, consisting of recognition, or completing (or perhaps renouncing) an exploration, and escape. Clearly, Mayer's labyrinth can be experienced only through time, and the temporal aspect is indeed central to his work.

Past, present, and future are all active in any perception of Mayer's work. The past is visible in the record of gesture and activity that is manifested in the stacking process; the present is the viewer's time, the duration of actual time that transpires in traversing the labyrinth; the future is implied in the precarious stack-up of wood sticks that hints at its own destruction. Nothing but logistics would prevent Mayer's structures from being permanent forms, but in fact, as is so readily detectable, these stacked-up forms are clearly temporary strictures imposed upon the materials at hand—materials which Mayer frequently recycles again and again as different forms. It is a curious paradox of Mayer's work that his materials perpetually call attention to themselves and to their obedience to the exigencies of the moment, reminding the viewer with each stacked element and with each contrived turn of other possibilities and other forms. One needn't know that Mayer often recycles his lath into new structures

or that any particular construction will have a legislated lifetime to sense that these structures are precarious arrangements whose impermanence may at any moment become the sole surviving fact of their existence. It is significant that in a statement no modern artist could have made Mayer has said, "The limitations of my medium are: the material, the system, gravity, the clock, and the exhibition space."⁵

All of the constructions in this exhibition defer to such limitations and strictures. All are held together by very strident means, yet all seem to be highly unstable, on the verge of collapse, or are plainly ephemeral placements set up for particular spaces. In one way or another, each of these constructions, which must actively *work* to sustain their existence, suggest their own termination. They are poised in an uneasy equilibrium, revealing a tension between the whole and the parts, between themselves and their surroundings, between their carefully plotted creation and an equally arbitrary destruction. The question can be asked, however, whether these jerry-rigged constructions with their athletic building methods represent merely a mannerist application of modernist ideas and materials; whether these artists are still preoccupied with the same manipulation of forms and materials that have engaged modern artists throughout the century.

It is true that the ten sculptors represented here certainly have affinities with the modern tradition in sculpture—and especially with Constructivism. But their works extend that tradition in ways that countervail many venerated attitudes about modern sculpture. Most significant is that the structures represented here are not simply objects created through a series of aesthetic decisions but are *events*—ephemeral situations in which materials are, for a time, caused to behave in a certain way. Nothing about them is inevitable or timeless, and all are openly subject to the fleeting conditions outside themselves. In this, the works by these ten contemporary sculptors suggest an aesthetic beyond modernism.

Notes

1. Kasimir Malevich, "Suprematism," in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 342.
2. Brian O'Doherty, "Inside the White Cube, Part I: Notes on the Gallery Space," *Artforum* 14 (March 1976): 24-30; "Inside the White Cube, Part II: The Eye of the Spectator," *Artforum* 14 (April 1976): 26-34; "Inside the White Cube, Part III: Context as Content," *Artforum* 15 (November 1976): 38-44.
3. *Overture: G-Strings* was originally commissioned by the WPA and a host of sponsors for its series of Washington Art Site projects. Happily, the duration of *G-Strings* included the period of this exhibition to which it has been "loaned." I wish to thank the artist and WPA for agreeing to include *G-Strings* in the present exhibition.
4. Recent research, notably by E.A. Carmean, demonstrates that Mondrian worked more intuitively and by trial and error than previously had been thought; however, that his was a fundamentally analytical pursuit that accorded with his theories of pure art remains undisputed. See E.A. Carmean, *Mondrian: The Diamond Compositions* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1979).
5. Edward Mayer, statement in *Regional Fellowship Catalogue* (Dayton, Ohio: Wright State University, 1977).

Loren Madsen

lives in New York City

8. *Model for Untitled Proposal*, 1977

balsa

4 x 12 x 12

Courtesy of L.A. Louvre Gallery, Venice, California

9. *Stacked Board Variations 1975-79*, 1979

ink on paper

23 x 29

10. *Stacked Board Variations 1975-79*, 1979

ink on paper

23 x 29

8. *Model for Untitled Proposal*, 1977

