



Inside Out: An Interview With Mel Kendrick

By *Daniel Rothbart*

15 January 2012



Mel Kendrick. *Jacks*, 2011, cast concrete.
Installation and loan courtesy:
Mary Boone Gallery, New York

D R: – What in your formative experience brought you to contemporary art?

MK: It wasn't in my background at all – nothing that my family knew about. I saw a Pollock at a museum and it floored me that you could do something like that – it was the freedom. When I took art history in college, it became clear that you could study this work and talk about it. In the late sixties, art was like rock and roll but with a whole language and way of thinking and talking about it that was challenging. A lot of the early minimal work was difficult to understand. It was the dialogue that drew me in. It was not only visual and physical but also had this intellectual component that somehow tied everything together.

DR: How did New York City in the 1970's contribute to your intellectual and creative development?

MK: In one sense, it felt like an extension of college where I had a group friends who were creative and quite verbal and funny, only in New York, these were artists who were actually doing something. It wasn't just talk. These were the people I had been reading about. When I was twenty-three, I went to Max's Kansas City and would sit in at tables with Richard Serra

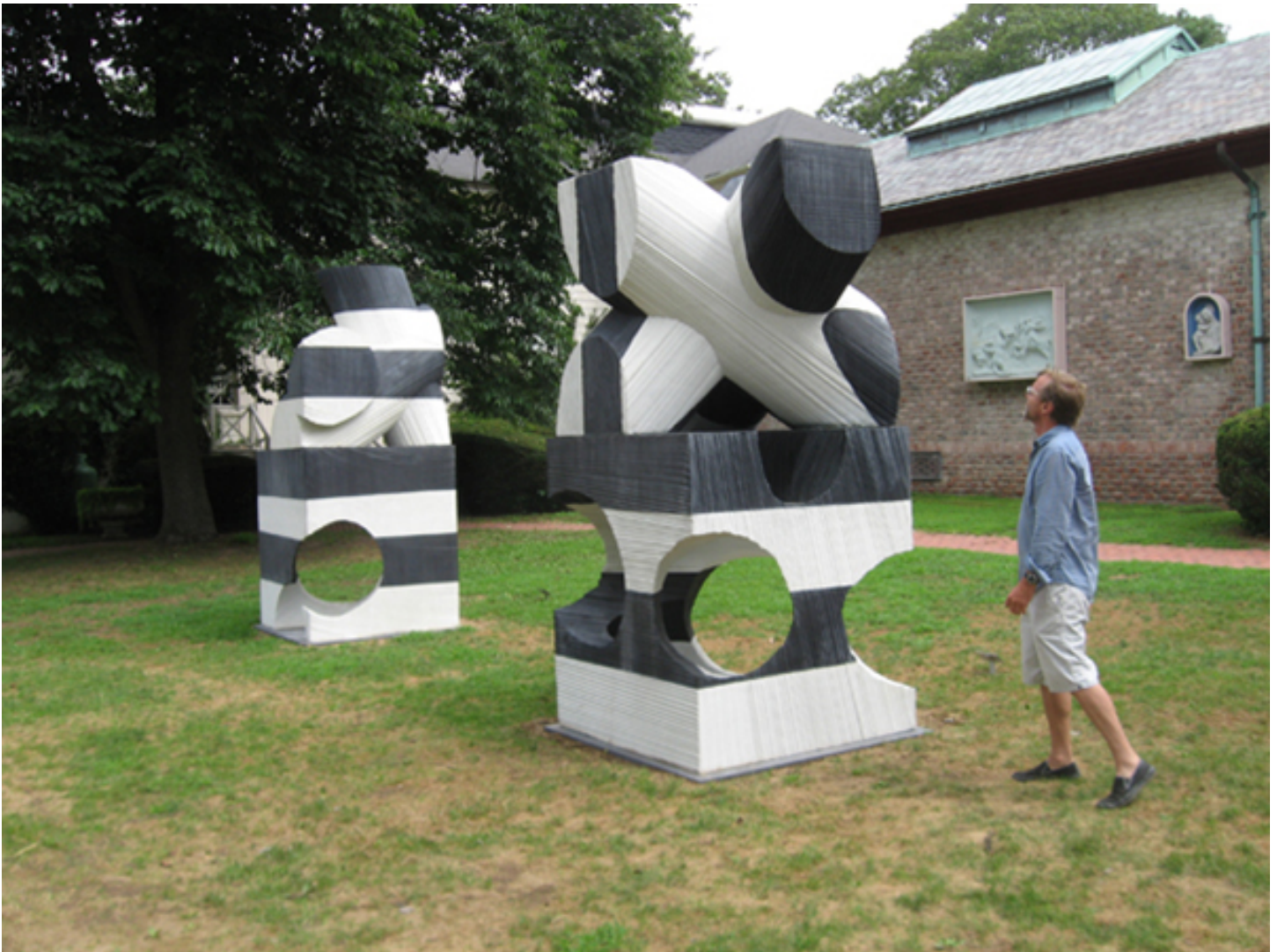
and Robert Smithson. Dorothea Rockburne first took me there when I was working for her in 1972. Otherwise I would have been scared to go in the door. In retrospect there were so many artists at Max's. Alan Shields was a bartender there. I must admit I was very shy, maybe more of a fly on the wall, but there were these people having arguments and discussions that were really interesting to me. They were talking with immediacy about what was going on at that time. I was a voyeur-participant very early, before my work had developed into anything singular. But it showed me a way of life. I liked the lofts and started converting illegal lofts downtown. Everything about it just seemed to feel right.

DR: Did you find yourself at odds with the prevailing currents of Minimalism when you were a young artist?

MK: No, but in one sense it was frustrating. Strictly speaking, the minimal work was being done while I was still in college and I would read about it and see it in Artforum (which was the bible) and come in and see shows which were moving into a conceptual vein. Mel Bochner, Robert Barry, and Lawrence Weiner whom I also got to know, were in this fantastic show "When Attitudes Become Form" at the Kunsthalle Berne and I absorbed the catalog. But there was no interest in what a young artist might be making. This was a dialogue and I was just on the tail end of it so everybody was there doing it but there was really no way in – there was no room. And being still a derivative artist myself, I more or less tried to find ways in through the niches in between. Sol Lewitt was using systems, and I would make systems that didn't work. But then I would see that Robert Mangold was doing incomplete circles which was what I was doing. There wasn't much room and the chances of doing anything remarkable in that narrow structure or view was not nil but pretty limited. I've said numerous times that what really shook things up was the "Bad" Painting" show at the New Museum where people came in from outside the system I was so enamored of and turned things on end. Not that I had ever had any thought of painting or doing anything like that but it broke the hegemony of the Minimal / Conceptual era. I think the concept we were working out of in the seventies, post-Minimal, was pretty dreary. Post-Minimal was just that. How do you work within strict concepts and humanize them?

DR: Are there particular lessons you learned from Robert Morris and Tony Smith that resonate today in your work?

MK: As teachers they were both incredibly supportive. Hunter was a very different place then and a lot of other students were just trying to get Master's Degrees in Art Education. Then there were guys (these two professors) I really knew about – I'd read everything they'd written. I appreciated just sitting with Tony Smith as he talked about how he and Barnett Newman got their friend Jackson Pollock painting again one day, about Pollock's "Blue Poles". Being included in those conversations gave me a feeling of possibility. It's not that I took from either of their work and did something with it. For me it was all about being an artist – how to be an artist. And could I be an artist? The questions were at a much more basic level, not what I could take or learn from this person. With Bob Morris we did performances, very little object making and there was very little interest in the object. You asked if my work was at odds with Minimalism. I was still trying to find a way to make objects that made sense when caring about how something was made was perhaps not viable.



Portrait of Mel Kendrick with jacks by Daniel Rothbart, Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York, 2011

DR: You described the origin of black striations in the “Markers” series as design motifs on Gothic cathedrals in Italy. Can you speak to other pre-Modern influences on your work?

MK: There is one that I haven’t spoken much about. In 1973 I traveled overland from Turkey to Iran and Afghanistan, starting from Istanbul. In Turkey I spent a few nights in a cave in the Goreme Valley. I became very involved in the idea of inverse architecture. Previously in 1969 I had seen the caves on the beach in Matala, Crete. These were places where people had dug tombs or houses or churches into a cliff and gave them all the motifs that were necessary for constructing a building, but that were no longer needed. This exists all over the Middle East. There are columns and arches cut out of rock, which mimic architecture and feel like architecture, but structurally have nothing to do with the caves. These gave me some early ideas about the inside and outside spaces and possibilities that I didn’t begin to explore in my work till much later. That trip culminated in Bamiyan, Afghanistan at the standing Buddha which at that point was the largest statue of Buddha in the world. It was carved in deep relief in the cliff face. I was able to climb up the mountain behind the Buddha where I found a tunnel in the rock that led me out on to the head of the Buddha. It was a phenomenal experience, particularly given what’s happened since, and the destruction of that Buddha.

There was a popular book in the seventies called “Architecture Without Architects” that focused on some of these ideas. Architecture generated by materials at hand. These materials either dictated the form, as with the trulli huts in Puglia, or were conscripted to existing motifs as in the early Christian caves.



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DR: Was Constantine Brancusi an influence and, if so, how do you regard his legacy?

MK: It's hard to understand how amazing Brancusi's work is until you consider what else was being done at the time. There was no basis for making work that minimal, that physical, when every balustrade in the hallway was more elaborately carved and intricate than what he might make in his studio and call a sculpture. He was a powerful personality, very sure of himself and what he was doing. I certainly don't go to Rodin or anyone earlier and I don't go to the Surrealists. An Arp is just very different, however beautiful it may be there is none of the physicality of a Brancusi. Scott Burton curated a show of Brancusi at the Modern once where he took pieces from their collection and rearranged the work so the top parts were matched with different bases. Brancusi always took photographs of his work in his studio, so there was a basis for this. He was very conscious of the communication between the pieces and he kept setting them up differently. You began to realize that this amazing sculpture to base relationship was a changing phenomenon in the studio. Of course, once something left the studio with a base, that became its historical context. Burton was able to reclaim some of that dialogue that had existed in the studio.

There is currently an exhibition of Brancusi and Richard Serra in Riehen, Switzerland. It's an interesting pairing but also somewhat ironic. When you look at a Brancusi, you always have to consider the base. When you look at a Serra, given its massive weight, you always have to consider what's under the floor. This relates to something I've spent a long time thinking about; the convention of the sculpture on a base, It has been a major focus of my work over the last decade

DR: Do you see an ongoing tension in your work between the will to impose geometry and a more intuitive approach to building?

MK: I think that conflict or tension is at the heart of the work. When I was doing "Core Samples" I was working with tree sections and I think the geometry became the stand-in for the intellect. It could be seen as culture versus nature. This work I'm doing now is very much about the handmade versus the geometric. These forms could quite easily be programmed into a computer and done that way, but they're more about an intuitive geometry. I did my Master's thesis on ancient stone circles in England and Wales with Tony Smith . The idea was that the geometry of the smaller circles was often the geometry of people holding hands in a line and swinging the arcs in a prescribed manner that were then marked on the ground. The final

circles have been much analyzed – they were not actually circles, and they were never simple.



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DR: A critic compared your work to the architectural fantasies of Gianbattista Piranesi. Do you see a Baroque tendency in your work?

MK: I think there's always a pull towards Baroque. That's part of the cycle of work. I'd describe the early stages of my work as Baroque because I am trying so many things. Then I have to pull back. One reason I like working small is that it helps me to clarify what I am seeing. Clarity was word on my mind when I worked on "jacks". I tend to start out very Baroque, very involved, and then draw back as I understand it better – not the other way around. It's in keeping with the art historical concept of *horror vacui*. You keep doing things and doing things until you learn you can do less and less and be clearer and more open to interpretation.

DR: What prompted you to shift scale to create the new monumental works in concrete?

MK: Opportunity, and I'm not sure about the concrete. Since I had been making and hollowing out pieces of wood and reconstructing them, I began to realize that the forms I was hollowing out were actually the molds for the parts that had been removed. That was a very clear, lightning bolt idea – a shift from breaking something apart and reconstructing it to having a hollow form and casting into it. The other aspect that pulled it all together was the layering, the striations in the concrete. The idea of inside and outside that made sense with the paint on wood, or the bark on trees, didn't have that clarity in concrete, which is a flowing liquid. Then I hit on this idea of letting the concrete settle in layers like sediment. Then there was my love of the black and white stone. Everything fell into place.

Writing Credits: Daniel Rothbart is an artist and writer. A former Fulbright Scholar, Rothbart is the author of Jewish Metaphysics As Generative Principle in American Art (Ulisse e Calipso) and The Phoenix (Ulisse e Calipso). His work can be found in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Orsini Foundation in Milan and numerous public and private collections.

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