

Rob Tufnell
For Example, Spike Island, Bristol 2002

'Jewellery is the ultraviolet of the spectrum of sculpture and architecture is the infrared' 1

Alex Frost's practice spans the spectrum of sculptural tradition, employing the vocabulary and materials of both the jeweller and the architect. *Mother Night* (1999), for example, is a series of children's climbing frames remade in miniature from soldered flower wire and coloured glass beads. For *Theme Show* (1998), Frost filled Transmission Gallery in Glasgow with a Buckminster Fuller Geodesic structure, fabricated over an eleven-day period, using plastic pipes, sheets of polythene and card. In the instance of *Mother Night* Frost reduced the functional and instructive to a decorative form, whilst in *Theme Show* he was concerned to return Fuller's patent (filed in 1951) from the Defence industries back to his ideas for utilitarian housing (and to its development at Black Mountain College where it had been first created from cardboard as part of a student workshop). Jewellery and architecture – decoration and structure – are recurrent themes in Frost's work. *Stations* (1999 - 2001), a series of mobiles constructed from coloured elastic bands and short lengths of doweling, reinvent the work of the sculptor Kenneth Snelson whose large-scale public works are self supporting through their use of 'discontinuous compression and continuous tension'. Just as the ambitions of Buckminster Fuller were taken from his control, in turn Fuller was said to have appropriated the 'energetic geometry' of Snelson, a former student of his at Black Mountain College, by coining the name 'tensegrity'. Frost reclaims the design for Snelson by re-making imagined student prototypes – prototypes that Fuller 'lost'. *Model for the ice town centre (Cumbernauld)* (1998) replicates the architectural scale model of Hugh Wilson's *Scottish New Town* (1955). Unlike Wilson's plans for a city centre created from reinforced concrete, Frost's model, fabricated from cellophane and magic tape, proposes one of ice. *Skelution* (1999) is a coloured wall drawing that traces hidden conduits within its host gallery's walls. As with other works by Frost, *Skelution* returns existing structures to prototype. In this instance Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers' project for Beaubourg, Paris has been miniaturised and inverted by Frost.

In contrast more recent works, *Frenchie, Necking and Spooning* and *Maverick*, (all 2000), are referred to by Frost as imploded installations. These mosaic works sample the worst excesses of Nikki de Saint-Phalle and Antonio Gaudí i Cornet to create objects that appear to have been fabricated as part of a love-struck teenage community arts initiative.

Frost's new work for Spike Island consists of a series of L shaped structures adorned with smaller re-workings formed of plaster, shellac and lengths of cut foam. The structures also provide support for some surrogate gilded styro-foam forms. *For Example* (2002) is made after Robert Morris' *Untitled (L-Beams)* (1965-7). Morris' investment in the extremities of sixties practice provides Frost with a metaphorical plinth for his ongoing investigation into the sculptural spectrum. Frost describes his revised Minimalism as 'boyish' rather than macho. Utilising materials and styles that orthodox tradition tells us are contradictory, *For Example* embodies the incongruities of the adolescent male: innocent and experienced, serious and stupid...

In her 1964 essay, 'Notes on 'Camp''², Susan Sontag described the sensibility – 'unmistakably modern, a variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it – that goes by the cult name of 'Camp''. Much of artwork contemporary to, or made in the years immediately following Sontag's essay now appears under the Camp umbrella. The 'artifice and exaggeration'³ that signified Camp in the mid 1960's can be recognised in the big beards, bricks and boxes of late American Modern art. Products of this generation appear as components of a sensibility 'that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much''.⁴ Diverse works of Richard Serra, Carl Andre and Robert Morris amongst others now exist perhaps within an esteemed canon, said by Sontag to include Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*, Hector Guimard's Parisian Métro entrances, Gaudí's Cathedral of the Sagrada Familia and Tiffany lamps.

Sontag describes Camp's 'theatricalization of experience'.⁵ The 'theatrical' nature of Minimalist sculpture was famously identified by Michael Fried in his 1967 essay in *Artforum*, 'Art and Objecthood'.⁶ Fried stated that 'Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre'.⁷ In the same issue of *Artforum* Robert Morris' essay 'Notes on Sculpture Part III: Notes and Non sequiturs' celebrated the duration aspect involved in viewing his work and that of his peers that Fried had attacked. Morris wrote 'Seeing an object in real space may not be an immediate experience'.⁸

1 Carl Andre quoted in the press release for *Words and Small Fields*, Sadie Coles HQ, December 2001

2 Sontag, S., *Against Interpretation*, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1966, p.275 (first published in *The New York Review of Books*, 1964)

3 Ibid. p.275

4 Ibid. p.284

5 Ibid. P.287

6 Fried, M., 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum* 5, No. 10, June 1967, p.12-23

7 Ibid.

8 Morris, R., 'Notes on Sculpture Part III: Notes and non sequiturs', *Artforum* 5, No. 10, June 1967,

Late American Modernist art attacked the notion of artwork as exclusive and in this sense was deeply politicised, but it can hardly now be seen as such being largely confined to private collections, museums and commercial, blue-chip galleries. Accordingly it can be generally perceived through its loss of 'context' to have gathered another important facet of Sontag's understanding of Camp – that it is 'disengaged, depoliticized or - at least apolitical'. In 1989 Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) was removed from New York's Federal Plaza amidst great controversy, yet in 2001 not such dissimilar works by Serra were presented by Harald Szeemann at the Venice Biennale where they were installed to popular acclaim with financial assistance from Gucci. The support of an exclusive fashion house is ironic given Morris' suggestion in 1967 that 'Such work would undoubtedly be boring to those who long for access to an exclusive specialness, the experience of which reassures their superior perception....' 9

Sontag sees Camp as being 'wholly aesthetic' 10. The problem with identifying such late Modernism as Camp would be that such art is usually characterised by parity rather than opulence – too *little* rather than 'too much'. And yet the industrial materials favoured by artists of this era were worked in exactly the same way as more obviously decorative artists such as Louis Comfort Tiffany used coloured glass and Antonio Gaudí utilised broken ceramics: 'Specialized factories and shops are used – much the same as sculpture has always used special craftsmen and processes... industrial and structural materials are often used in their more or less naked state, but the methods of forming employed are more related to assisted hand craftsmanship.' 11

Sontag interprets Camp as 'Dandyism in the age of mass culture – that makes no distinction between the unique object and the mass-produced object' 12. Her observation again finds an echo in Morris' 'Notes': 'The new three dimensional work has grasped the cultural infrastructure of forming itself which has been in use, and developing, since Neolithic times and culminates in the technology of industrial production.' 13

In 1974 Morris created an infamous untitled poster edition to advertise his *Labyrinths-Voice-Blind Time* show at the Castelli-Sonnabend Gallery, New York. This self-portrait presented the artist as the archetypal macho sculptor - naked bar an oversized German army helmet, aviator shades and studded collar, glistening with oil and wielding thick, linked steel chains. Morris was acknowledging his position within what was, at the beginning of the 1970s, seen to be a racist and sexist tradition. Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff were to plot the same strains through the Modern movement in their *Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture* 14 which sought to expose the 'pejorative use of the word "decorative" in the contemporary art world'. They quote, amongst others Adolf Loos from *Ornament and Crime* (1908) who said 'I have made the following discovery and I pass it on to the world: The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects.' 15

Morris encouraged the more obviously decorative sculptor and some-time collaborator Lynda Benglis into creating her own version of his untitled poster. Benglis took out an advertisement in *Artforum* (for her exhibition at the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York) in which she presented herself naked but for a pair of white sunglasses and a veneer of oil, wielding a dildo. Benglis' response was not just a declaration that American art in the seventies was still a 'heroic, macho sexist game' 16 but also an oblique reference to Martha Mitchell, the wife of Richard Nixon's Attorney General who wore similar shades and who 'was doing a lot of the talking' post Watergate: 'They couldn't shut her up, so she became some sort of role model for me.' 17

Benglis' statement was misunderstood. The following issue of *Artforum* carried a letter of protest to Editor in Chief, John Coplans authored by his own associate editors Lawrence Alloway, Max Kozloff (the husband of Joyce Kozloff), Rosalind Krauss, Joseph Masheck and Annette Michelson who felt compelled to renounce the 'extreme vulgarity' of the image 18. To quote Sontag once again: 'The old-style dandy hated vulgarity. The new style dandy, the lover of Camp appreciates vulgarity...the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves...' 19 Alex Frost's *For Example* could be seen to be doing something similar.

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p.24-9. Reprinted in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, Ed. Stiles, K. & Selz, P., University of California Press, 1996

9 Ibid.

10 Sontag, op cit.

11 Morris, op cit.

12 Sontag, op cit.

13 Morris, op cit.

14 Audon, V. & Kozloff, J., 'Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture', *Heresies* 1, No.4, Winter 1977-8, p.38-42, Reprinted

in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, Ed. Stiles, K. & Selz, P., University of California Press, 1996

15 Loos, A. *Ornament and Crime*, 1908

16 Lynda Benglis quoted in Ratcliffe, C., *The Fate of a Gesture: Lynda Benglis*, Artnet.com

17 Ibid.

18 Ironically Coplans is now better known as a photographer who exhibits images of his own naked octogenarian body.

19 Sontag, op cit.