

NEW EUROPE COLLEGE



LOST IN SPACE

Edited by Augustin Ioan

This volume is published by the New Europe College as
part of the RELINK publication series

Copyright © 2003 – New Europe College

ISBN 973-85697-6-1

COUNTER-VOLUME IN SCULPTURE AND ART HISTORY APPROACHES

MARGARET DIKOVITSKAYA

The leading nineteenth-century theories of sculpture stated that “sculpture is the art of cutting or carving any substance into a proposed form”.¹ In its strictest sense, it was confined to carving, or carving out (from Latin *sculpere, sculptum*). There was an understanding that sculpture began where material touched space.² In this way, space was understood as a frame around the mass. In 1914, a Cubist sculptor, Alexander Archipenko (1887-1964), reversed the idea and concluded that sculpture may begin where space is encircled by the material.³ (Fig. 1, *Woman Combing Her Hair*, 1915) The artist conceived space as a part of the sculpture. This paper will attempt to test briefly three different approaches that seem to be historically valid in the interpretation of counter-volume, or “modeled space” in sculpture.

Using an approach of **Alois Riegl**, one can say that there were the different objectives and tendencies in the artistic aims

¹ Westmacott, Richard (1864), *Handbook of Sculpture, Ancient and Modern*, Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, p. 1.

² Hildebrand, Adolf von (1893), *Das Problem der Form in der Bildenden Kunst*, Strassburg: J.H.E. Heitz.

³ Archipenko, Alexander (1960), *Fifty Creative Years, 1908-1958*, New York: Tekhne.



Fig. 1. Alexander Archipenko, *Woman Combing Her Hair*, 1915
Bronze, height 13 3/4"
Museum of Modern Art, New York

[*Kunstwollen*] involved in the development of the art of sculpture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, this fact, that space began to play a formative role in the modernist sculpture, can be interpreted as

showing an inner necessity which governs artistic performance, that is, as showing the way in which the artistic intention is self-generated and not a response to purposes outside itself.⁴

Given that all art possesses intentionality or purposiveness, one may regard Cubism as a formal elaboration of the expressive means inherited from the nineteenth century. It was Cubism that turned the principal subject of sculptural art, a human figure, into a set of geometrical forms unfolded in separate angular planes. A cube is an object of nature, so the artistic effect could have been achieved by revealing positive and negative shapes *concealed* in the conglomerate. The Cubist sculpture introduced aerial volumes that were enclosed, locked in the material volumes. It is the material that became a frame around the space in Cubist "modeled void."

Considering differences "between degrees and types of the beholder's involvement",⁵ one should keep in mind that a break through a mass of sculptural material was incomprehensible for onlookers in the nineteenth century. Transfer of the air space inside a statue signified new perception of space when it was viewed as an active dynamic force. Thus, in the twentieth century, for the first time in the history of art,

⁴ Podro, Michael (1982), Riegl, in *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, p. 95.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

the faculty of plasticity was attributed to the form of space guiding onlookers toward creative psychological action. Counter-volume brought about a new order of thinking in art: a beholder is not merely gazing upon the sculpture but participates in the creative process proceeding from plastic qualities of those objects that are outlined by the shapes which she or he associates with the shapes of the objects presented. In the beginning, the image is in front of an onlooker. As contact closes-in, one is not merely looking at the sculpture surveying it, when it protrudes as an object; but on the contrary, the image "sees" a beholder, crowds her or him in. The modeled void provokes the spectator, so that s/he is given a unique opportunity to touch an inner mystery of sprouting of Form.

Although "space" was rarely addressed directly in the early works of **Martin Heidegger**, it is determinative of his overall thought. A developed philosophy of space exists within *Being and Time* (1927). Here we find a relational view where space is constituent of how things are situated. People usually think that space is empty, and that this space is subsequently filled in some way. According to Heidegger, however, worldhood is the basis for the referential relations between pieces of equipment, and these relations, in turn, are the foundation for the various places. In other words, the world is not "in space," but "space" is in the world. In the 1951, the lecture *Building, Dwelling, and Thinking* space was connected with the concepts of building and dwelling. As a dweller upon the earth, man builds upon it, and his buildings become the nodal point, which gathers the earth and sky together into an articulated spatial structure. According to Heidegger, buildings are the locations that allow spaces. For example, a bridge is a construction that gathers the earth as landscape around the stream. The notion

Lost in Space

of “gathering” is pivotal for Heidegger. Things gather the earth into definitive structures and in this role open space. Space designates

a place cleared or freed for settlement and lodging. A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary....⁶

Space is understood not as a receptacle in which to put things but as a locational *a priori*: spaces receive their being from locations. Heidegger further elaborates this concept in the 1969 essay *Art and Space*. He admitted that sculpture as art deals with artistic space.

Art as sculpture: no occupying of space... Sculpture would be the embodiment of places. Places hold something free gathered around them, which grants the tarrying of things under consideration and a dwelling for man in the midst of things. If it stands thus, what becomes of the volume of the sculptured, place embodying structures? Presumably, volume will no longer demarcate spaces from one another, in which surfaces surround an inner opposed to an outer. What is named by the word ‘volume’... would have to lose its name.⁷

Consequently, the spatial “emptiness” is tied to the special character of place and understood not as a deficiency but rather as a bringing-forth.

⁶ Heidegger, Martin (1971), “Building, Dwelling, and Thinking”, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York: Harper & Row, p. 154.

⁷ Heidegger, Martin (1997), “Art and Space”, in N. Leach (Ed.), *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural History*, London & New York: Routledge, p. 123.

Following Heidegger, one can find a visual representation of places by means of the omission of masses and the juxtaposition of volume and void in Archipenko's works. In the sculptures, material masses take part of "boundaries" whose inner space possesses particular substantiality. This is the site in which a "focused gathering" occurs. Thus, emptiness becomes a seeking-projecting instituting of places. Archipenko's art approximated sculpture as an embodying "bringing-into-the-work" of places. Once it is granted that art is the bringing-into-the-work of truth and truth is the unconcealment of Being, Archipenko's sculptures, in Heideggerian sense, turn into the embodiment of the truth of Being in its work of instituting places.

In the **postmodernist approach**, discreteness of speech, writing, and voice is not understood as their exhaustion during a pause, soundlessness, non-speaking, dumbness, and silence. Rather, pause is responsible for giving certain rhythm, pulsation to speech, word, or noise. One can say that silence is the "territory", which holds two discrete acts of speech together. Silence cements acts of speech assembling its fragments. Therefore, a pause is not blank but rather a knot that ties up the sentences. A beholder can liken a word on periphery of the pause to a mass of the material on periphery of "emptiness" in Archipenko's sculpture. Indeed, pause is a complex verbal space where the invisible event of birth of the text takes place. Similarly, "modeled space" is that place where once compression-expansion of material becomes a pulse that appears as a sculpture.

Both language and sculpture are dependent on the void. According to Richard Staleman,

Lost in Space

Language signifies... not the thing but the absence of the thing and so is implicated in the loss. It must become silence and lack in order best to express the faraway absence of what it designates.⁸

As a writer inhabits “the space of the nothing”, Archipenko builds on the material of “nothingness” in order to create a work of art signifying the absence of what it designates. In plastic art, the shape of the empty space is no less significant than the meaning of the shape of the solid matter.

“Modeled space” developed into the important artistic medium whose evolution is traceable in the span of the twentieth century. For its inventor, Alexander Archipenko, it was a negative of the solid that provoked the spectator. For Henry Moore, the holes through masses protruding onto the spectator brought information about the sculpture’s rear-rounds required by the nineteenth-century sculpture were replaced by a “study” of the sculpture’s facades. Finally, Andre Bloc allowed the beholder to enter within the work of sculpture that merged with architecture (Fig. 2, *Sculpturally Conceived House*, 1962).

I tried to test three different approaches, which shed light on Archipenko’s work. Are they all relevant for the interpretation of what he had done? Can we prefer one as more “fruitful” to another? I shall let Archipenko speak for himself about

[...] the new character and the new meaning in modeling the form of space. This psychological direction excludes

⁸ Stamelman, Richard (1990), *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, p. 39.



Fig. 2. Andre Bloc, *Sculpturally Conceived House*, 1962
Plaster, height 20'
In the artist's garden, Meudon, France

Lost in Space

a utilitarian, an accidental, or a frivolous approach. A creative process can be compared with the psychological reconstruction of the absent object reposing in or memory. By its absence, the object leaves its own form in our memory. I found confirmation of my ideas in the French philosopher Henri Bergson: “[...] object, once annihilated, leaves its place unoccupied; for by hypothesis it is a PLACE, that is a void limited by precise outline, or in other words, a kind of thing”.⁹

Archipenko believed that through modulation of space our consciousness participates in the creative process because that which does not exist is recreated within us in the abstract form of space, and becomes a reality in our optical memory. Could we satisfy our curiosity by just knowing Archipenko’s own explanation? Perhaps, there are no definite answers. As Keith Moxey put it,

Historical interpretations are valued or devalued according to the way in which their articulation of the concerns of the present in the context of the study of the past either coincides or differs with our own perspective on the political and cultural issues of our time.¹⁰

⁹ Archipenko, Alexander (1960), *Fifty Creative Years, 1908-1958*, New York: Tekhne, p. 57.

¹⁰ Moxey. Keith (1994), *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, p. xiii.