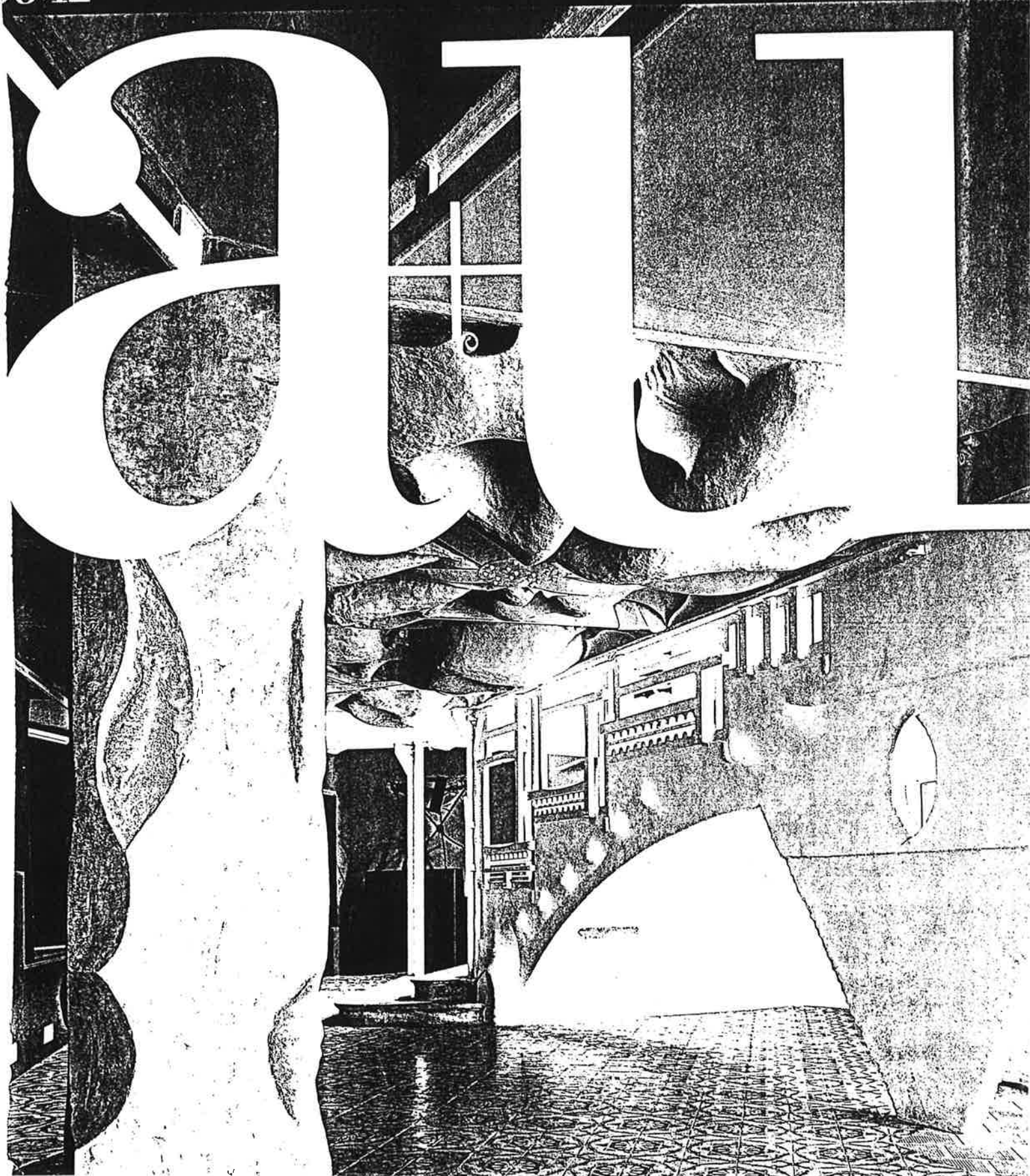


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Renzo Piano Building Workshop
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Sandro Marpillero

Four Projects by Mary Miss

"Drawing on very common constructions and twist them in some way. I want them to be familiar to people, yet not quite the same. It becomes a different place then." M. Miss

Since the mid 1960s Mary Miss has established a sculptural territory far beyond conventional ways of modeling materials in monolithic objects. In comparison to other artists of her generation, that also explored relationships between built structures and their viewer (Aycock, Holt, Trakas, Fleischner), Miss has, in the past thirty years, courageously expanded the range of her works, to diverse scales and locations. Alongside structures that explore interactions between landscape and built forms, Miss has proposed and constructed important public spaces within the urban scene. For example, she is currently working on a large project that will transform the Union Square subway station in New York City, one of the most fascinating and complex underground mazes of metropolitan infrastructure. The four built works presented here outline a range of the fields that Miss addresses in her work. They include an installation within gallery walls, an open air construction with multiple above and below ground elements in a museum park, an urban waterfront plaza and a topographic structure directly engaging a grove of pine trees. Alongside their different scales and degrees of public access, what these constructions share is a commitment to directly engage the viewer. They are meant to be experienced by moving one's body through their variable spaces. They are configurations that make space physically palpable, rather than just visually appealing images. In an interview of 1981, Miss termed the repertoire of her works as "images on an extended scale."¹ More recently, she has wished her work to achieve the status of "an art of engagement."² In terms of their relationship with the architectural community, the projects and constructions of Mary Miss have maintained the charge of a constructive challenge. This was established by a text, published in 1984 in *Perspecta*, the Journal of the Yale School of Architecture, in which she exhorted readers and architects to "think about building structures that can be integrated into the built context—physically and visually integrated, not just an afterthought."³ In that text, Miss criticized the commemorative function of figurative public sculpture, as conceived by traditionalist committees and the role of artists as producers of cultural commodity, as promoted by avant-gardist circles. She discussed notions of site and context, as they had been re-defined by the history of post-minimal and environmental art. She posited for artists operating in the public realm a role different than that of decorators, who are dependent on autocratic architectural conceptions. Her interest was stated as part of a larger project to re-introduce space and time for reflection in our built physical environment:

"Alter the context by introducing transition zones from street to building (human scale); construct spaces where slow motion is possible. Give people the luxury of engagement, not confrontation. Think of spaces/structures that would allow people to be the connectors between the open space—parks, waterfronts—and the dense areas of midtown. Their experience of open space might change the character of dense space."⁴

While the American architectural scene seems to cultivate a vertiginous attraction for the image, resulting in the ecstatic pursuit of media-oriented surfaces, Miss still believes in the first hand effect of space on people. While distancing herself from both self-referential formalisms of architectural object-makers and immaterial iconisms of theoretical radicals, Miss holds on an apparently "conservative" stance of content-oriented density. She pursues, against both these cultural currents of architectural and sculptural discourses, a serene vocabulary of constructed depths, eschewing the techniques of mass communication. Her attitude about how sculpture can be integrated in either cities or landscapes and her (sometimes frustrating) experience as public sculptor makes her feel strongly that "artists should assume active roles within culture and society,"⁵ conceding, at the same time, that "we can only have a limited impact. We are not politicians."⁶ She is willing to engage the public realm even if only half of the work of an artist with her convictions can be considered done when a piece is put in a given location. The

other unknown half of Miss's investigations can only take place when the public comes to see her work and interacts with it. Miss accepts this challenge of maintaining a relative lack of control about the personal keys of interpretation that will applied to her work. Like an architect committed to discuss her or his work on the basis of a building's modes of inhabitation.

Over time, Miss's structures have figured out, re-defined and constructed a variety of strategies to viscerally promote a reciprocal involvement between the public and a place. They suggest another kind of construction, different from architecture in that their very function is the articulation of specific spatial experiences. In Miss's case, absence of a conventional building program heightens the possibility of focusing on the complex interplay of cultural and physical responses to a place. Exploration of these charged realms can only take place at a slow motion. They prompt the mental construction of individually layered narratives of short sequential perceptions, which interrogate the relations between instant visions and bodily sensations, both singularly and as a whole. Each visitor is thus directed to use the resonance of Miss's forms and materials to reflect upon her or his own compelling spatio-temporal associations.

1)

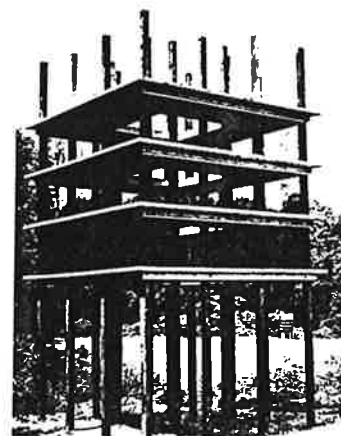
The earliest open air piece presented here, *Perimeter/Pavilions/Decoys* (Nassau County Museum, Roslyn New York, 1977) has been "pegged both as a major work and as a seminal event in the history of site-related sculpture."⁷ It consisted of five elements of three different types, carefully disposed in a landscape setting: three wood and screen tower-like structures were placed both near and far; one five foot high earth mound marked the edge of an upper plateau, like a high middle ground up; and a barely visible underground courtyard hinted at the presence of a middle ground below. To see this work the viewer, approaching by a narrow dirt road, had to walk through the whole four-acre field of rolling slopes. In the words of Miss, "there were changes of scale in the towers and inaccessible spaces in the underground structure; boundaries and perception of distance were brought into question, as were the limits of illusion and reality. But it was up to the viewer to assemble these images, draw comparison, and structure information"⁸

This accumulation of experiences could not become a totality in classical terms, where everything is synthesized into a single object, that resolves contradictions in a privileged voice. Rather, these multiple elements could be pieced together as a limited synthesis, complex yet specific in its continual becoming. At the Nassau Country Museum, the underground courtyard was a sixteen-foot-square opening, that one reached climbing down a ladder to find that the ground s/he had just walked across was undermined by the courtyard enlarged below the ground to forty feet on each side. At that point and moment, it was as though one was standing under a thin skin of the earth. A person couldn't tell how far back the excavation extended because of the darkness. The narrative embodied thus required the viewer to do an intense work, in order to perceptually assimilate oppositions and effects played against each other, like the uncertain limits of this space, ominously extending below the ground experienced only minutes before as "natural," solid and safe.

2)

Study for a Courtyard: Approach to a Stepped Pool (ICA Gallery, London, 1983) was an interior full-scale study of an enclosed court with various access points. In Miss's words, "entering the work was like walking through a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle—turning unexpected corners, being brought up short. The experience was much like walking through the streets of London, layering one experience upon another."

The possibility that each person moving through this structure, towards the interior, would accumulate a different experience, like a metropolitan derive, has been related to Miss's longstanding interest for Chinese and Japanese informal gardens.⁹ As design paradigms, these references are about leading a subject through a sequence of



Above and below: *Perimeter/Pavillion/Decoys*, Nassau County Museum, Roslyn, New York, 1977. "There were changes of scale in the towers and inaccessible spaces in the underground structure; boundaries and perception of distance were brought into question, as were the limits of illusion and reality. But it was up to the viewer to assemble these images, draw comparison, and structure information." —Mary Miss. Photos on pp.105-111 by the courtesy of Mary Miss

上、下：境界線／あずま屋／おびき寄せの場所。「は塔でそのスケールが変わり、地下構造物は立ち入ることのできない空間をつくりだしている。こうして、境界や距離認識は疑わしくなるが、幻想と現実の境についても同じである。だが、これらのイメージを寄せ集め、比喩を引き、情報を組み立てるものは見るものしだいなのである。」(メアリー・ミス)



Above and below: Study for a Courtyard: Approach to a Stepped Pool. ICA Gallery, London, 1983. "Entering the work was like walking through a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle—turning unexpected corners, being brought up short. The experience was much like walking through the streets of London, layering one experience upon another." —Mary Miss

上、下：中庭の習作：段状プールへのアプローチ。ICAギャラリー、ロンドン、1983年。この作品の中に入るのは、いわば三次元ジグソーパズルの中を歩き回るようなものである。不意に現れる角を曲がったかと思うと突然高いレベルに立ち止まっている。ロンドンの街並みを自分の足で巡り、次々と体験を重ねていくのに似ている。」(メリー・ミス)。

events suggested by the character of a setting, moving through dramatic landscapes, via paths, staircases and platforms. This idea that one never quite knows what's coming next and never gets an overview—as opposed to formal European perspectival gardens—is for Miss more important than their architectural language. She operates with a wide range of stylistically unrelated influences, memories of things seen in personal trips and read about in books from childhood on, all filtered down to an archetypal level of productive availability, beyond their cultural overcodings. The general dialectic between the visual and the physical dimensions of Miss's work thus expands to challenge encrusted distinctions between the functional and the decorative, while also questioning conventional disciplinary separations within design disciplines and their ambivalent relation with engineering.

3)

With the *Battery Park City Esplanade III* (Battery Park City, New York, 1985), Miss got exposed to the peculiar "heaviness of architecture."¹⁰ She collaborated with both an urban designer and a landscape architect in the construction of a two-and-a-half acre site on the Manhattan waterfront. The urban designer, Stan Eckstut, was the co-author of the well-known development plan for the whole area, nostalgically promoted through the 1980s for its re-discovery of axes, vistas and other elements from nineteenth century civic design repertoires.¹¹ Characteristically, he wanted a termination point for an avenue at the site, something like an obelisk. Miss, on the other hand, wanted to address the fact that in lower Manhattan one doesn't know that s/he is living on an island. She has said: "I wanted to make a place where one could really hear the water, smell it, get wet if it was high tide—tying the water and the land together. I wanted there to be a sensuousness to this place—a very rich sense of the land and the water meeting here." Fortunately, her strong stance prevailed.

Meeting the esplanade is a path which straddles different scales and pushes one, coming from the density of lower Manhattan, on a curving pier and out over the water or onto a deck at a lower elevation. These situations of lightness and suspension offer a counterpoint to the harshness of the traditionally reconstructed esplanade with a sense of arriving at a literally deconstructed place. Miss proposed to remove different parts of the engineering platforms that support the landfill, to reveal the artificiality of the grounds that she landscaped with unlikely massive boulders. The land, water and structure come together in a culminating circle, defined on one side by the built and on the other by the natural, with an exposed steel two-story lookout to the Statue of Liberty across the water. The upper level of this lookout recalls the steel structure concealed in the head of the famous monument, whose gaze dominates over a harbor of abandoned piers from which the last ocean liner has long gone. Miss's interest in the conceptual geology of this place, its history, the structures that once were and still are there uses the idea of memory in an archeological sense. Like walls and foundations of superimposed historical layers, whose levels can be progressively uncovered and experientially re-discovered, these un-nostalgic structures have the feeling of ruins. With declared hate for historicism Miss has taken remnants of previous structures or situations and built upon them with a measured rhetoric devoid of sentimentality. Instead of "building the slate clean" she builds on top of what is there, allowing multiple buried voices to make themselves heard. At Battery Park, as elsewhere, her work elaborates on an idea of environmental memory and its activation by built structures. As one moves through these spaces, one element after another triggers memories through emotional/psychological impact of physicality. Miss doesn't ask for a direct recognition of all the sources employed in each work, but enables each larger ecological situation to become a place where people can stop and spend meaningful time.¹² In her words, "South Cove is the most that I can do to address contemporary culture and its media dependency. If I can make a place that people can go to, spend time and relate to it in a different way that they would by going to Shea Stadium or Madison Square Garden, it is worthwhile for me."

4)

To conclude, I want to present a fourth realization by Mary Miss, in personal terms. The *Jyvaskyla Project* (Finland, 1994) consists of seven steel lined wood troughs (fifteen to forty feet long) and a small observation deck overlooking the sloping grounds of a two acre pine grove. The troughs run parallel to each other and are disposed at different yet perfectly horizontal elevations. The two sides of each of them stretch around the base of a tree, clasping it under the apparent pressure of rhythmical pickets. These are embedded in earth mounds rising from the varying profile of the ground. The seven troughs are filled to the brim with perfectly still water, which multiplies the shadows cast on their concave steel lining, turning them in shimmering reflections against the sunlight. This work thus singles out seven trees and transforms them into time-apparatuses for an expanded ecological meditation. This is as much as I can say by looking at photographs of a place that I haven't had the good luck of visting. Yet this simple description builds up in a narrative whose suggestive power I myself cannot resist. The effect is like that of fairy tales, in which not much is supposed to happen yet "use of their enchantment" proved supportive of psychological gains.¹³

By now, I know that Miss's projects are very much about experiences of place, and that this quality is almost impossible to convey in photographs. In a recent interview about her built work, she has stated that "not only you cannot photograph it, but when you are there looking at it, it is hard to define."¹⁴ Yet the images of her work make explicit a desire to overlay a place with the private, interior kind of life-experience—one's psychological, emotional, sexual levels of feeling and thinking. These are unstated needs within our ultra-fast culture that, according to Miss, aren't being often addressed.

The Jyvaskyla Project operates explicitly at the level of figural interpretation of a specific place. Yet, its photographs already catch me by the guts, bringing forth multiple meanings. What matters in these images and (I am sure) in the built structures, is that one ends up spending time within them, layering the information in a process that constructs an emotional reality that would otherwise have remained unexplored. Introducing time within the structure of vision they stimulate primary experiences. They activate deep pulsional forces yet slow down their movement, almost to a point of standstill that allows to feel them. This explosion of pure visuality takes place in terms of a regression to the complete privacy of an expanded "optical unconscious."¹⁵

Mary Miss offers us a path to limit the constrictions of what she terms "distant abstraction" over the natural and built worlds. In her words: "It is not about a specific singular reading, a textual reading of a place... We all have the ability to relate to things on the level that I am talking about, but nobody is called upon to use those facilities of observation."¹⁶

New York, August 1996

Notes

1. See the interview with Phillis Tuchman in *Mary Miss, Interior Works 1966-80*. Brown University/University of Rhode Island. Fall 1981
2. In Christian Zapatka "Interview with Mary Miss" *Lotus 88*, February 1996, p.49
3. Mary Miss. "On a Redefinition of Public Sculpture" *Perspecta*—The Yale Architectural Journal. no.21. 1984. p.60
4. *Ibidem*
5. See my "Interview with Mary Miss", *Progex #9*, 1993, p.10
6. *Ibid*
7. Kate Linker "Mary Miss", exhibition catalogue, ICA London 1983. In this important critical assessment, Linker elaborates a detailed phenomenological reading of this and other works, through targeted cultural references and precise associations. My text is deeply indebted to her writing.
8. Miss herself has offered, in various publications, very clear descriptions of her work. Given the limited space of this publication I will hereafter, for the most part, repeat them with slight paraphrases and additions.
9. See the perceptive "Conversation" of Alvin Boyarsky and Mary Miss, in *Architectural Association MEGA VII*, London, 1987, accompanied by several revealing pages with drawings and photographs of historical mesoamerican and far eastern sites. As Boyarsky wrote in the Foreword, this publication was also a first-time "near-complete record of Mary Miss' oeuvre, produced

to coincide with an exhibition of her drawings at the AA in Bedford Square, while a small band of dedicated staff and students [was] in the process of completing an installation specially designed to mark the south-west corner of this genteel, eighteenth-century Bloomsbury setting."

10. For the discussion of its many reasons in the "Minimalist" context of American architecture, see my "The Unbearable Heaviness of Architecture" *Rassegna 36 (Minimal)*, 1988

11. See my "Renaissance and Illusion: Battery Park City and Other Histories" *Casabella 507*, 1984

12. In talking about the Esplanade project, Miss has stated: "I went to Peru just before I started work on Battery Park and I don't think the organic quality would have come through as it did without that imagery of intricately carved boulders, with the water pouring out at their edges and the repetition of network figures at a small, medium, grand scale—a consistent view of how one makes one's place in the universe."

13. See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 1975

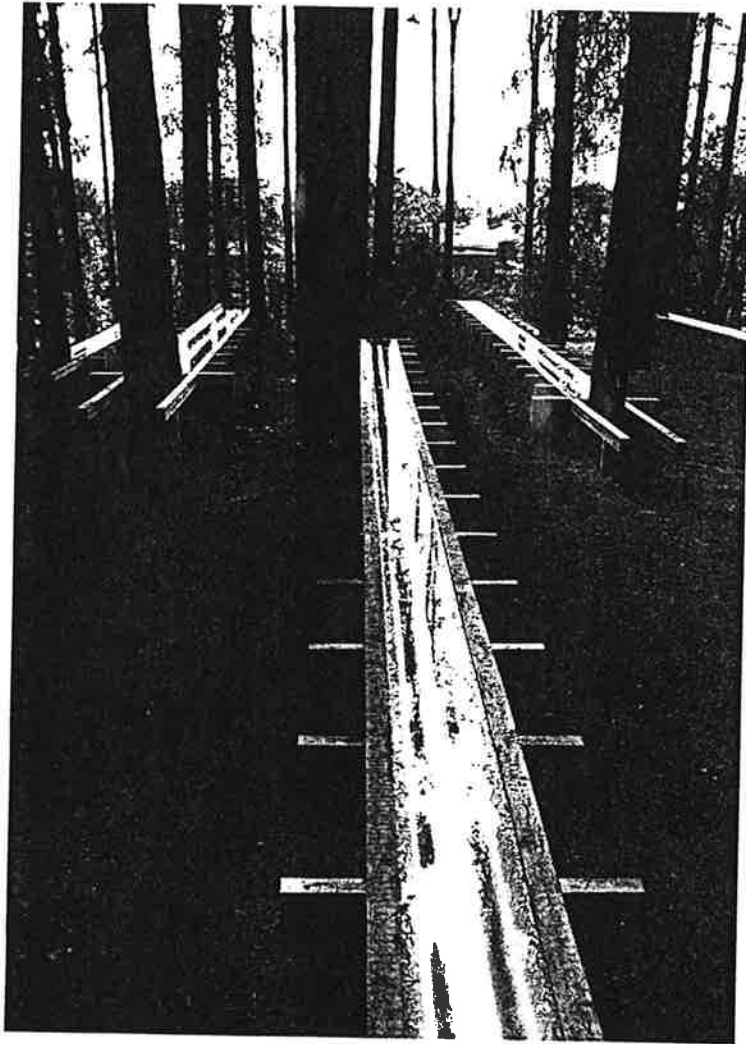
14. Zapatka, *Lotus*, p.46

15. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 1993. This seminal book reconsiders the relationships between artistic production and a rigorous psychoanalytic inquiry towards new thresholds of visual and corporeal engagement.

16. Zapatka, *Ibidem*

Jyväskylä Project. Jyväskylä, Finland, 1994, "... consists of seven steel lined wood troughs (fifteen to forty feet long) and small observation deck overlooking the sloping grounds of a two acre pine

grove. . . . The seven troughs are filled to the brim with perfectly still water, which multiplies the shadows cast on their concave steel lining, turning them in shimmering reflections against the sun light."



ジヴァスキラ・プロジェクト：フィンランド、ジヴァスキラ、1994年。「構成は、内側にステールを張った木製の細長い槽7本（長さは15フィートから40フィート）と2エーカーの

松林を見渡す小さな観賞用デッキ。7つの槽はすべて縁まで水で満たされ、まったく動きのないこの水によって凹型に内張りされたステールはいろいろな影を映す。」