ALYSON SHOTZ
INTERVAL

July 19 - August 17, 2014

‘T’ Space
When Steven Holl designed ‘T’ Space on his 4-acre property tucked into a glen adjacent to Round Lake, he had light and space in mind. The windows, doors, and skylights puncture the lofted, T-shaped structure allowing the exterior light to pour in from all sides, illuminating the walls and interior enough to eliminate the need for artificial lighting. Stating as its mission “to encourage a reflection on the power of art as a transcending force,” ‘T’ Space seems the perfect venue for a sculpture by Alyson Shotz whose investigation into light, perception, and transformation are central to experiencing her work. As curator Katie Stone Sonnenborn astutely points out, “Changeability is a fundamental concern for Shotz, and her work leads viewers to become aware that the incidental, circumstantial, and transitory parts of their visit (time of day, number of visitors, physical location in the gallery) are intrinsic to their comprehension and reception of the piece.” For this particular installation, one can add time of year, location of the venue, and shape and size of the gallery space to this list.

High summer in the Hudson Valley with its verdant sunlit pastures, shady lakes, and quiet retreats, is a splendid place to spend a lazy afternoon in nature. The region is increasingly populated with New Yorkers who have discovered its wonders and have migrated North for the warmer months, making it a new hub for the creative class. Dotted across the valley are the homes and studios of artists, writers, architects, and art lovers and ‘T’ Space, now entering its fourth year in operation, is a magnet for visitors, weekenders, and full-time residents seeking the kind of transcendence that both art and nature can offer. Perhaps the most satisfying reward of that pursuit is when one encounters the convergence of the two forces.

Shotz’s long-standing fascination with nature and its intersection with art began with her early work as evidenced in sculptures such as *Still Life* (2001) with its lanky rubber stalks balancing on plastic casters to her digital photographic series such as *Natural Selection* (1999) and *False Branches* (2002) that merge images of real plants with synthetic and fictional objects to create futuristic hybrids. In her seminal performance piece *Reflective Mimicry* (1997) she blurred the boundary between the human body and the natural world by walking through a field wearing a bodysuit covered in dozens of circular mirrors. Documentation of the performance shows her form dissolving into the landscape, rendering the membrane between the two more permeable while conventions of figure and ground are called into question. In her outdoor sculpture *Mirror Fence* (2003), a 138-foot picket fence faced with mirror, the viewer’s perception is complicated, even hindered, as the artwork disappears into the landscape as it reflects its natural surroundings. In her later work, Shotz is compelled by the urge to consider the underlying physics of nature such as gravity, light, time, and mass, leading her to introduce such materials as piano wire, silvered and clear glass beads, stainless steel balls, and clear plastic lenses. She takes the ethereal nature of her monumental sculptures such as *The Shape of Space* (2004), *Wave Equation* (2010), and *Geometry of Light* (2011) to new
For her exhibition at ‘T’ Space, Shotz has fittingly chosen to present Interval, a three-dimensional work made from stainless steel wire threaded in glass beads, the third in a series of work, first commissioned in 2013 for an exhibition at The Visual Arts Center at University of Texas, Austin while she was an artist in residence. The second version was shown in the glass entryway of the Brooklyn Art Museum earlier this year. Like water flowing down a sloped landscape before taking the shape of a pond, the size and form of these sculptures are defined by the space they occupy. Here, the work stretches out to approximately fourteen feet horizontally as it twists through the long end of the T. Suspended from above, it pours down towards the floor, taking advantage of the force of gravity. In spite of its monumental scale and expansive form, its mass seems rather slight, its density negligible. Shimmering with the light of the relatively small but airy room, the work emanates a kind of mesmerizing energy and exemplifies Shotz’s uncanny sense of presence, both temporal and spatial. One becomes keenly aware of the physical experience of time and of being in the space.

Each passing moment brings unexpected discoveries rewarding the patient viewer. A flicker of light from outside might catch a gleaming strand of steel, drawing attention to another twisting pattern or whimsical shape that had at first gone unnoticed. Hundreds of beads that are strung along the wire at various intervals slowly reveal themselves in plain sight. As the viewer makes his or her way through the space, the shape-shifting form is enlivened by the various angles of light refracting off the wires and beads and one’s perception shifts from line to volume and back again. A viewing from the second floor introduces yet another exquisite play of light and shadow accentuating the specificity of the venue to the reception of Shotz’s work. As the artist puts it, “I would like my sculpture to be constantly changing, like the weather. When an object has an easily understandable structure or surface, one can know it too quickly. I would like these objects to be ultimately unknowable if possible. Light, time of day and angle of view all contribute to the change the sculptures can encompass.”

The engagement with the space and reliance on gravity in Interval brings to mind the work of Post-Minimalist artist Eva Hesse, in particular one of her last large-scale works, Right After (1969), a hanging sculpture made by dipping fiberglass in polyester resin. Like Shotz’s work, Right After expands laterally and is suspended from above, floating between the ceiling, floor, and walls. Hesse, in response to the reductive geometry of Minimalism, used light and space as forms of expression and to engage in issues of femininity and the body but also, like Shotz, she grappled with materials, process, and the give-and-take between interior and exterior. Both works utilize radiant materials that are transformed in the ambient light, giving them a transparent, cloud-like appearance.

For Shotz, the idea of creating a work that approaches invisibility, which she has been experimenting with since the late 1990s with Reflective Mimicry, is tied to her interest in bringing sensory perception to the foreground, and inviting a heightened optical experience for the viewer who is willing to engage with the work. For that reason, her work, while it is informed by some of the tenants of Post-Minimalism, seems more aligned with the work of Lygia Clark, the late Brazilian artist whose work, coincidently, is on view concurrently at Museum of Modern Art in a retrospective aptly titled The Abandonment of Art. During the later years of her career until her death in 1988, Clark fostered active participation of the spectators through her works. “Lygia Clark and I share an interest in the relationship between artist and spectator,” Shotz said. “The spectator is involved in making my art what it is. The spectators become participants and even change the way the work looks when they are in front of it.” Clark’s belief that the completion of her art depends on the participant’s encounter with it embodies a true shift from object to event, a notion that pervades much of contemporary art today. Shotz, who was just coming of age when the influence of these two artists began to take shape, represents a contemporary manifestation of their early innovation.

Architecture, like Shotz’s sculptures, relies on the intersection of people to complete the ideas embedded within its design. While Holl was thinking about light in designing ‘T’ Space, he also considered the viewer and what it would feel like to enter the building and to be present among art objects. To walk from the green lawn, along the elevated ramp, and into the light-filled space, is to take part in a cultural encounter that is not merely optical, but experiential. That experience is made more profound by the transcending force of Shotz’s Interval, a work that feels entirely at home in this extraordinary place.

ENDNOTES

IMAGE CAPTIONS:
Page 11: Alyson Shotz, Reflective Mimicry, 1997, courtesy of the artist
Page 12, top: Alyson Shotz, Mirror Fence, 2003, installation view at Storm King Arts Center, photo by Jerry L. Thompson
Page 12, bottom: Eva Hesse, Right After, 1969, installation view at Brooklyn Art Museum, courtesy of The Estate of Eva Hesse

Mary-Kay Lombino
Rhinebeck, New York
June 2014
Made of wire strung with silvered beads, Alyson Shotz’s *Interval* is a network of light designed to capture a portion of space—to capture it and, simultaneously, let it go, for this sculpture’s mesh is wide. From certain angles, its crisscross pattern almost disappears. *Interval* flirts with invisibility. Nonetheless, it is a large work. At “T” Space the artist suspended it from points on the ceiling calculated to allow its shimmering presence to expand as much as possible. This sculpture takes charge of the place where we see it. Yet it is not in the least domineering.

Shotz has mentioned in several interviews that when she was an art student, in the late 1980s and early ’90s, she was put off by the “machismo” that pervaded sculpture departments in those days. To be a sculptor was to master muscular techniques—welding, forging—that have traditionally been used to produce large metal pieces. Rejecting both the means and the end, Shotz came by a series of sure-footed steps to the definition of a very different goal. She wanted to create volume without mass. Presence without the usual aspiration to monumentality. This sounds contradictory and it is, but only if we close our eyes to Shotz’s work and listen to ideas about sculpture that have persisted since ancient times.

In the fifth century B.C. a gold and ivory statue of Athena stood in the interior of the Parthenon. The work of Phidias and his workshop, it was immense, not to say overbearing—well-suited to serve as the cult object it quickly became. Modernist sculptors did not of course make effigies of divine beings. Their work is nearly always non-figurative. Still, it shares crucial principles with Phidias’s *Athena Parthenos*, as she was known. First, a serious piece of sculpture must be made of some august material, though ironies are available here. John Chamberlain worked with battered hunks of scrap metal, true enough, and yet he ennobléd his results by adhering to another principle: sculptural form, however
abstract, must evoke a human presence either heroic or beautiful or both. And this presence must somehow transcend ordinary life.

*Parthenos* means “Virgin” or pure, untouched by earthly passions, and we recall this traditional virtue whenever we praise works of art for their purity, their integrity, their autonomy. Shotz’s works don’t even pretend to be autonomous. Before we have a chance to respond to *Interval*, it has responded to—a collaboration with—the space where we see it. Far from standing aloof from ordinary life, the work swims into the ceaseless and familiar currents of moment-to-moment perception and feeling. It doesn’t ask us to pause, take a deep breath, and get into an art mood.

So we could say that Shotz’s work is not sculpture but anti-sculpture. It would be better, though, to say that she is one of the artists who began, in the wake of Minimalism, to find new possibilities for sculptural form—not just new styles and materials but new ways to imagine sculpture into visibility. But what about the Minimalists themselves? Didn’t Carl Andre’s floor pieces do away with monumentality? No, though it would require too long a digression to explain precisely why they didn’t. For now I’ll say only that Andre’s abject version of the monumental is as imperious, in its way, as the straightforward monumentality of Phidias or Michelangelo. A better question is raised by Minimalist installations. Wasn’t a gallery full of Donald Judd’s boxes just as immersive, just as environmental, as Shotz’s presentation of *Interval* at ‘T’ Space? Again, no, and to see why not is to see the full scale of her innovation.

Think back to the interior of the Parthenon when the statue of Athena was new. Face-to-face with this effigy of ivory and gold, you would be not only awed but also uplifted, and the goddess’s presence would in some measure sanctify your own. In the West, sculptural figures reflect us back to ourselves, our individualities exalted (however worshipful we may feel). Such sculptural objects as boxes by Judd and Robert Morris have the same effect (in a secular mode), an effect that Morris tried to undermine by insisting on the primacy of the installation. Reduced to the status of one object among others, the viewer/participant in a Minimalist installation would be released from all that exaltation—all that dubious delectation of selfhood. But it never worked that way.

For all the anti-transcendent, anti-self theorizing of the Minimalists, their installations permitted one to be in them but not of them: at once a down-to-earth creature perceiving the facts of the situation and a transcendent self, a “pure” consciousness capable rising above that same situation on the wings of its analytical faculties. Shotz’s installations do not permit this doubleness. To enter her installations is to be drawn into a play of light and form and spatial ambiguity that cannot be conceptualized. It can only be experienced and the meaning of our experience arises from an elusiveness that encourages us to reimagine ourselves.

Sharing a space with *Interval* we become more than usually alert to nuances of light and currents of intention. Scale shifts, perspectives warp under pressure from our looking. Giving up its geometrical clarities, space comes alive and well-established distinctions between self and setting begin to blur. Drawn beyond our familiar boundaries by the wondrously seductive subtleties of this sculpture’s form, we no longer understand ourselves as the unitary, autonomous selves that we become in response to sculptural objects that idealize unity and autonomy.

That self—sometimes pretentious, always at least a bit detached—is a fiction. And so is the self, dispersed through space by its responsiveness, that Shotz’s work encourages you to be. All our self-images are works of the imagination. The question is: which image of ourselves do we prefer? *Interval* makes an oxymoronic case—powerful yet delicate—for a self so immersed in its surroundings that it comes alive to ambiguities of light and space of the lush and provocative kind that prompts us to be conscious in the first place. A self not autonomous but fully *there*, wherever it may be.

Carter Ratcliff
Chatham, New York
June 2014
INVARIANT INTERVAL
2013, Stainless steel wire, aluminum collars, glass beads
240 x 192 x 180 inches, (Exhibition at the University of Texas Visual Arts Center, Austin, TX)
Photo credit: Ricky Yanas

>Inflation of Gravity (detail), 2005, Clear glass beads and stainless steel wire
108 x 96 x 156 inches, Private Collection

>INVARIANT INTERVAL #2, 2014, Stainless steel wire, aluminum collars, glass beads
144 x 120 x 120 inches, (Installation at the Brooklyn Museum)
Photo credit: Mark Woods

>White Wave, 2013, Wet spun white linen thread, pins
648 x 144 x 2 inches, (Exhibition at the Edythe and Eli Broad Museum, East Lansing, MI)
Photo credit: Robert Hensleigh

>UNTITLEO Yarn drawing detail), 2011, Hand-dyed yarn and pins on wall
141.5 x 110 x 5 inches

>INVARIANT INTERVAL, 2013
Stainless steel wire, aluminum collars, glass beads, 240 x 192 x 180 inches
(Exhibition at the University of Texas Visual Arts Center, Austin, TX)
Photo credit: Sandy Carson

>THE STRUCTURE OF LIGHT, 2008
Silvered glass beads on stainless steel piano wire and aluminum, 120 x 216 x 120 inches
(Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)
Photo credit: Michael Moran

>INVARIANT INTERVAL, 2013, Stainless steel wire, aluminum collars, glass beads
240 x 192 x 180 inches, (Exhibition at the University of Texas Visual Arts Center, Austin, TX)
Photo credit: Sandy Carson

>GEOMETRY OF LIGHT, 2011
Cut plastic Fresnel lens sheets, silvered glass beads, stainless steel wire
157 x 336 x 360 inches, (Exhibition at Espace Louis Vuitton, Tokyo)
Photo credit: Jeremie Souteyrat

>THE SHAPE OF SPACE, 2004
Cut plastic Fresnel lens sheets and staples, 175 x 456 x 96 inches
(Collection of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum)
Photo credit: Kristopher McKay

>TOPOGRAPHIC ITERATION, (Trial Proof), 2014, Pigment print on Masa Japanese paper crumpled by hand, 8.5 x 11.25 inches.
Photo credit: Joerg Lohse

>UNTOLED Sketch, 2014, Pen on paper, 5 x 8 inches

>ALLUSIONS OF GRAVITY (detail), 2005, Clear glass beads and stainless steel wire
108 x 96 x 156 inches, (Private Collection)
'T' Space is delighted to present this exhibition of Alyson Shotz’s sculpture titled Interval. We are grateful to Alyson Shotz for creating this work specifically for the gallery. We would like to thank Mary-Kay Lombino, The Emily Hargroves Fisher 1957 and Richard B. Fisher Curator and Assistant Director of The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, for recommending the work of Alyson Shotz to us. We greatly appreciate the insightful essays of Mary-Kay Lombino and Carter Ratcliff and the thoughtful catalogue design by Jim Holl. At the exhibition opening, Kimberly Lyons will read her poetry and Raphael Mostel will premiere his composition Vertical Thoughts for SHA on keyboard. We thank Derek Eller Gallery for their kindnesses and Javier Gomez Soria for his installation expertise.

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Susan Wides
'T' Space Curator