

## Collaborations

### Jean Halstead & Svetlana Swinimer

John K. Grande

---

Number 58, Winter 2001–2002

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9354ac>

[See table of contents](#)

---

#### Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

#### ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

#### Cite this document

Grande, J. K. (2001). Collaborations: Jean Halstead & Svetlana Swinimer. *Espace Sculpture*, (58), 48–49.

# COLLABORATIONS Jean Halstead & Svetlana Swinimer

JOHN K. GRANDE

Jean Halstead and Svetlana Swinimer have collaborated as artists on various projects over the years using a combination of old and new technologies. The process of collaboration often leads to a cross-pollination of ideas, providing fertile ground for discovering new ways of working with material.

The artmaking process becomes more of a challenge as a result. Jean Halstead, originally from Philadelphia, studied art in Japan and has exhibited extensively in Europe; Svetlana Swinimer, who came from Russia, where she studied math and art, has exhibited in Africa and Russia. The collaboration between them is omnipresent. From the birth of an idea to the hands-on creation of a piece to the ongoing deconstruction of an original sculpture, reworked into another medium, the process involves four hands and two heads every step along the way. Readily available materials often provide a stimulus for an idea, after which, assemblage, modification, and transformation take place and a new work is miraculously born. The various elements work as props within a greater scenario, yet their collaborative works resonate with a raw intuition and experimental energy. Ancient and universal themes, brought into the contemporary arena, come to life in surprising ways. There is a cadence and harmony to their approach, and the experimentation can be spiritual, or physical and sensual. Founded in the artmaking process, the collaborative aesthetic is uniquely their own. It has no specific relation to any contemporary movements or trends in art, yet by way of intention these works are mature, communicating their collective experience in a global way.

Halstead and Swinimer's first collaboration provided a visual interpretation of three separate movements of organ work from Bach's Toccata, Adagio and Fugue BWV 564. Vertical metal cylinders suggest organ pipes,

and white folds of undulating plaster that move like waves across three panels, floating in an imagistic way, recall the Adagio and, in a more complex arrangement, the Fugue with its overlaid melody. These fragments form a collage that extends in three sections across a whole wall surface like a bas-relief. Darker reflective rectangles seem to descend, mingling with the plaster motifs that allude to Bach's cascading Toccata. The rhythms and resonances are not literal; they are more like an assemblage of elements with intervals between.

The exhibition *Facets of Abstraction* began a period in which Halstead and Swinimer innovated with what they call the "transmogrifying process." This process involves building a sculpture to then deconstruct it using photography, ultimately to reconstruct the piece as photo collage. The more recent *Transmogrification* exhibition (2000) included a three-dimensional metal sculpture assemblage titled *Goddess 69-18*. The sculpture, made of welded truck components, notably a large spring, represented a primordial goddess. *Transmogrification* worked on multiple levels, and *Goddess 69-18* became a spur to creating twelve colour photo pieces. This series of 24 photos and 10 photo-sculptures "transmogrified" the goddess sculpture, deconstructing the original artwork into a variety of guises. For the artists, the results signified a way of associating her with different phases in art history, such as the Renaissance, Impressionism, and Constructivism. The abstract layering of imagery, textures, and colours, though based on the sculpture *Goddess 69-18*, achieves a denser sense of mystery than the sculpture *per se*. It becomes a kind of visual archaeology or language that causes the viewer to establish their own associations and meanings. We discover the core sensibility of the original sculpture by decoding a visual matrix of simultaneous images. These works depend on the deconstruction of the originating source, yet generate a new



Jean Halstead, Svetlana Swinimer, *Number 4*. Black walls of a cell-like room with shafts of light, descending wooden beams, hanging, in chaos — bound by chains. The cell invites the viewer to share its confines with these rigid elements of power that threaten like a sword of Damocles, or open channels of insight and renewal. Here is a moment of time suspended. Photo: Courtesy of the artists.

hierarchy of symbolic content.

According to Greek legend, Nike, a classical figure in Greek sculpture and traditionally associated with victory, assisted Zeus in his war with the Titans. In *Nike-Pyrrhic Victory*, Halstead and Swinimer integrated shards and twelve inch spikes into freeform white plaster drapery folds and white extended wings. A contrast is thus established between the overtly classical subject (she could be compared with the Victory figure of Samothrace) and a tenor of implicit violence evoked by the spikes and shards. One could read the piece as a political allegory. Exhibited at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull and the Museum of Nature, *Seat of Civilization* (1997) incorporates an aggregate of symbolic representations and motifs to create a new throne for the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis from 5500 BC. Elements include a serene face above, and a sarcophagus for Osiris behind, with a grieving mask. *Seat of Civilization*,

which also uses the transmogrifying process, was deconstructed into colour photo works that achieve a strong visual and colouristic intensity. In a vertical, rectangular metal structure, sections of photo imagery from *Seat of Civilization* have been reassembled in fragments. One can see the component photo fragments of Isis from a variety of angles as they are suspended within the space of the structure. As flat image fragments presented in a sculptural format, they invite the viewer to make a leap of faith, to reconstruct sculptural form out of the images. The spatial intervals between the images play as significant a role as the images themselves. The metal container that frames the fragments suggests a sense of distance and the passing of time, as if we were envisioning this reconstruction from a hypothetical future.

In the installation piece titled *Credo*, Halstead and Swinimer created a chessboard floor, a maze with reconfigured andirons on it. The

overall atmosphere, recalling that of a cathedral, represented the artists' statement about collective worship — spiritual or material. Spaced intermittently on an area of white tiling, the andirons almost look like human figures, a collectivity grouped within this schematic, cathedral-like construction that included totemic tubes of metal suggesting organ pipes. Transparent acrylic walls and windows were decorated with gel symbols like stained glass. The abstract geometrical motifs — triangles, rectangles, and finer, more intimate forms — in the windows and in one gothic-styled window frame heightened the sense that this was a sacred place. Using a variety of materials to heighten the contrast — transparent plastic and iron —, *Credo* bore ironic witness to acts of worship.

*Basic Red* creates a three-dimensional illusion of spatial depth with its vivid jagged outline in space, and bright red diamond shaped steel grids become its source-transmogrifying photos.

These photos were taken from a variety of angles and distances, and then developed by Halstead and Swinimer to become experimental collages. The result is a series of sometimes sensuous and organic abstract images of spatial density and depth, sometimes even projecting an illusion of spherical space.

*Galaxy* (1998) is a lyrical, suggestive work of pure sculpture that uses metal grill sections of varying dimensions at different depths. This cage-like work thrusts upwards and outwards on one side. Two planet-like metal balls of differing sizes in the piece look as if they were orbiting in space. This environmental sculpture is like a drawing in three dimensions that builds the illusion of movement through space. In the simplest of ways, this evocative and elegiac work transmits that sense of wonder one experiences gazing up at the sky on a clear night.

*Number Four*, exhibited in

1999, has a powerful minimalist thrust. In a cell-like room with black walls, long wooden boards hang in space at haphazard angles. This large-scale sculpture has an expressive immediacy. The free-floating wooden boards are constrained by chains attached to them from above and below. The individual wood sections are themselves already "structures," standardized 22 x 42 sections of wood. Nevertheless they evoke a sense of force and counter-force, a simultaneous breaking apart of bonds and of containment and control. The abstract character of *Number Four*, which is like a Constructivist allegory, forcefully communicates its threatening, intransigent message precisely because of its simple, sparse economy of expression.

In their ongoing collaborations, Jean Halstead and Svetlana Swinimer have developed their own language of expression. It is one that works against the hegemony of rational space and linear

time that so often limits the language of sculpture to the realm of "pure object." In their experimentation with a broad array of media — painting, photography, installation, sculpture, and computer technology — Halstead and Swinimer express the vitality of their collaborative vision by weaving together a variety of processes and materials in novel ways. The various media and processes overlap and coalesce. In the space between these processes of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction, we discover multiple layers of meaning, at times spiritual, at others physical. Their engaging multi-process approach to art-making is intensely abstract and experimental, and while the two artists, as individuals, have differing styles and philosophies of art, their collaborations are a learning process that generates a dynamism and produces artworks that achieve a harmony. ←

## Joel Shapiro ON THE ROOF

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has featured five sculptures by American artist Joel Shapiro (born 1941) in the 2001 installation of The Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden.

Drawn from public and private collections, *Joel Shapiro on the Roof* included three large cast bronze and two painted cast aluminum sculptures, dating from 1989 to the present. The works have been exhibited in the 10,000-square-foot open-air space that offers spectacular views of Central Park and the Manhattan skyline. *Joel Shapiro*

*on the Roof* was coordinated by Nan Rosenthal, Consultant in the Department of Modern Art, and Anne L. Strauss, Assistant Curator, also in the Department of Modern Art.

The Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden opened to the public in 1987. Annual installations have featured selections of modern sculpture from the Museum's collection and, most recently, presentations of works by the artists Ellsworth Kelly (1998), Magdalena Abakanowicz (1999), and David Smith (2000). "I had some trepidation about the roof," says Shapiro, "because I think it's not an easy space, there is a massive amount to compete with beyond

the roof. I mean, it's such a fabulous, wonderful vista of the park and buildings. So I tried to pick larger pieces because I felt that they would sort of intercede in the cityscape without blocking the view." The five sculptures are abstract, yet they allude, in varying degrees of specificity, to the human figure. They draw upon several traditions of modern and premodern sculpture to create work that is new and evocative. Shapiro's usual method of making metal sculpture (he also works in wood), including the five objects in this installation, is first to create a small wooden model by joining lengths that are square or rectangular with hot glue and a pin gun

(a tool that uses compressed air to shoot very thin pins into wood). There are no preparatory sketches; the model is adjusted by trial and error. The model is then constructed at full scale from chunks of sawn wood joined to one another. Next the wood lengths are sand-cast in bronze at a foundry, so that traces of the kerf — the saw marks against the wood grain — remain visible on the exterior surface of the finished bronze. The molds created to cast the bronze have a core built inside them, so that the bronze parts are hollow and only three-eighths of an inch thick. These parts, sometimes reinforced internally by stainless steel, are then bolted (or, more rarely, welded) together to form the nearly finished sculpture. The parts join at different angles. Once the work is constructed, Shapiro chases the surface to bring out the original pattern of the wood grain and to reduce, yet not erase, traces of the casting process — for example, the sprues, or opening's, through which the molten bronze was poured. Sometimes he then applies a light patina or, as in the case of the two cast-aluminum works from 2000-2001 in this installation, covers the entire surface of the work with primer and a coat of vividly coloured oil paint. ←  
*News Release:* Harold Holzer, Naomi Takafuchi ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)).

JOEL SHAPIRO, *Untitled*, 1996-1999. Bronze, artist's cast. 731.5 x 434.3 x 349.3 cm. Collection of Joel Shapiro. Works of art by Joel Shapiro are © 2001 Joel Shapiro / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Bruce Schwarz.

