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*Endless Columns*

Robin Peck

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# Endless Columns

Robin PECK

*For future generations the Endless Column will remain the symbol of a thinking that tries to escape mediocrity...*

— Ossiip ZADKINE<sup>1</sup>

Consider vertical and horizontal axes: the waking axis, the body vertical but moving horizontally, and the dreaming axis, the sleeping body horizontal but moving vertically. This is the difference between sleeping and waking, between profane wakefulness and the sacred panopticon of the dream. Sculpture is a wakeful dream, a third axis turning on both of these.

Colleen Wolstenholme's *Buspar Column*, is an eight-foot-high bronze sculpture representing anti-anxiety tablets (buspirone hydrochloride) stacked end to end. It mimics the



Colleen WOLSTENHOLME, *Buspar Column*. Bronze. 2.46 m. Photo: Fraser Ross.

Greg FORREST, *Stanley Cup/Washing Machine*. Bronze. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

form of Brancusi's *Endless Column*. Wolstenholme's *Buspar Column* is only the latest in a series of imitations of *Endless Column* that include Jacques Lipschitz's *Figure* (1926-30, cast bronze), David Smith's *Growing Forms* (1939, cast aluminum), Isamu Noguchi's *Endless Coupling* (1957, cast iron), and the entire oeuvre of Carl Andre.

Consider Andre's wood carving *Ladder #1* (1951), and his wood construction *Pyramid* (1959). His seminal work was *Lever* (original 1966, reconstruction 1969):

"All I am doing [with *Lever*] is putting Brancusi's *Endless Column* on the ground instead of in the air. Most sculpture is priapic, with the male organ in the air. In my work *Priapus* is down to the floor." — Carl ANDRE<sup>2</sup>

Wolstenholme's sculpture is satirical and melancholic, comically utopian and hopelessly pessimistic. An "endless column" of anti-anxiety pills chides the myth of Brancusi's spiritual tranquillity (and Andre's materialistic harmony). As a memorial totem to the victims of the pharmaceutical treatment of depression, Wolstenholme's column recalls the function of Brancusi's final 1937 *Endless Column* in its role as a war memorial. Wolstenholme's column is held erect, not by stacking, but as a façade held stiff by its integument skin of hollow cast bronze. Brancusi's column at Târgu-Jiu has its own hidden construction rationale: the individual cast iron units threaded, like beads, over a square internal steel column.

"In one aspect or another, my sculptures are always torsos" — Hans ARP<sup>3</sup>

Wolstenholme's *Buspar Column* is only eight feet high — a tall standing figure. Each pair of pills is the approximate size and shape of the female body, with hips and breasts. This is statuary distressed, historicized, and fetishized. It represents the post-Prozac nude, a series of truncated torsos without head or limbs, without mind or mobility. They are gendered by their smooth surfaces and their immobility (recalling Alberto Giacometti's use of standing nude prostitutes as models, the *filles de plâtre de Paris*).

"...where the garment gapes ... it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing, between two edges: it is the flash itself which seduces..."

— Roland BARTHES, *The Pleasure of the Text*<sup>4</sup>

*Buspar Column* is partially masked, concealed in the front and back and revealed on the sides. It is like a figure wearing sandwich boards, the unclothed sides revealing sculptural flesh, somehow still the original plaster and not yet bronze. The sides are curiously concave and irregularly smoothed. *Objets trouvés* are used by Wolstenholme to remake Brancusi without the jejune tactics of appropriation. Instead, there is a conceit, much modified by irony, that the form of an anti-depressant pill looks like a sculpture by Brancusi.

Sculpture has always been something to hold onto. Each section of two pills in *Buspar Column* becomes a fantasized torso, breast and hips. And it is here, on the concave "waist" sides of this sculpture, that the hand naturally comes to rest and to caress and feel the slight unseen irregularities of the surface. One nearly feels the original plaster here, fragile plaster worn smooth, so like ivory and human skin. These are the ticklish ribs of the sculpture, where flesh is revealed and felt between bone.

Greg Forrest's *Stanley Cup/Washing Machine* is a full-scale cast bronze replica of the Stanley Cup sitting atop a washing machine. The Stanley Cup is a hockey trophy, a grail of sorts. It is not odd for artists to make trophies for themselves. Art as memorials to artists, sculpture as trophies for losers.<sup>5</sup> The base of the cup has been extended over the last century to provide more room for the listing of winning teams. Over time, the cup has become a column, a representation of vertical mythic time. Forrest's washing machine base is the latest in this basal series, extending the formal logic of the multipartite base. Forrest's work evokes the same sequence of forms, multipartite square below and reductive round above, familiar in the sculptures of Brancusi and the sculpture of Goethe (1777), recalling the cosmological tradition of foursquare earth under the dome of sky, as represented in Rome's Pantheon. Forrest's cup is set too high atop the washer to look down into, rendering the cup a visual

solid, directly recalling the domesticity of Brancusi's *The Cup* (1918-1924), a wood carving of a cup filled right to the brim, empty but full of itself. Brancusi's *Cup*, sometimes titled the "Cup of Socrates," was not intended to be displayed on a pedestal, but exhibited casually, in a dining room or on a pillow. At the same time, his friend the composer Erik Satie was similarly occupied with casual "furniture music," music intended to serve as a background.

Bronze casting is always an anachronism, a sign of the artifactual status of art. Bronze evokes both art and time. Exposed to the open air, it is naturally a golden-brown colour. Oswald Spengler on brown and patina: "I have called brown a historical colour. [...] when the Renaissance dug these things (bronzes) up it found them [...] with the patina of



many centuries. The historic spirit, with its piety and longing, fastened on to this [...] Patina is a symbol of mortality [...] of time measurement and the funeral rite. It corresponds to the wistful regard [...] for ruins and evidences of the distant past [...] Again, it is not the Classical statue, but the Classical *torso* that we really love [...] Age, for us [...] ennobles all things. For Classical man, it depreciates them."<sup>6</sup> Bronze is a surrogate for gold. Brancusi

intended that his original *Bird in Space* sculpture, titled *Pasarea Maiestra*, be gilded, but was dissuaded by the difficulty of working with gold and settled for polished bronze instead. Bronze takes us back through the materiality of the ages, as in the Classical Greek (and Hindu) record of cultural decline from Gold to Silver to Iron ages, and more recently, the now conventional technological sequence (derived from 19th-century Danish archaeology) of Paleolithic, Neolithic, Bronze and Iron ages.

The upper part, the "cup" of Forrest's *Stanley Cup/Washing Machine*, has three discrete forms, cylinders that can be read as torso, neck, and head. Combined with the mechanistic image of the washing machine base, it has the appearance of a robot, like a terrifying *Dalek* alien from the *Dr. Who* television series. Forrest's base has back and front and sides, each with different texture. The front is established by the resemblance of the circular door to the form of a camera lens, freezing the approaching spectator in its glare.

The upper portion of Forrest's sculpture is all profile. It could have been produced on a lathe. This portion of the original cup is where the names of the winning team players are engraved. In Forrest's bronze replica, this same area retains evidence only of hand modelling (Forrest modelled the entire work from wax), texture rather than a text. The hand is drawn to this, to cup and slow its potential rotation.

While bronze casting is the most indirect of methods, steel can be the most direct. Most of Cal Lane's sculpture is cut from steel. Lane's *Doilies* are each a circular plate of steel two feet in diameter and cut in a lace doily pattern. The doily patterns are like Wilson A. Bentley's famous snowflake photomicrographs, apparently no two the same. They recall the patterning of Islamic-Gothic architectural tracery, its rebirth in the structural steel of Victorian Gothic, and the glass and steel modernisms derived from it. Consider Lane's position as a steel sculptor here, at the end of the age of steel. Sculptor David Rabinowich claimed<sup>7</sup> that he used steel because steel was a nearly invisible or "neutral" sculptural material, due to its widespread use in the production of sculpture, and was therefore appropriate for the production of an abstract art. He understood steel as a sign for modern sculpture itself. But like all



Cal LANE, *Dirt Lace*, 2004. 5.9 x 9.1 m. Photo: Courtesy Wynick Tuck Gallery.

ideology, the ideology of the age of steel is invisible to its ideologues. Rabinowich understood art as abstraction, as a nude unclothed by the gross poetics of materiality. Lane understands it as veiled, alternately concealed and revealed.

Lane's sculptures *Shovels* are actually spades with dysfunctional blades, similarly lace-cut. They look like cuneiform lace lingerie. Lace lingerie is a surrogate to hair, whether worn as a veil (the concealment, and alternately the revealing, of the face and neck by hair) or lingerie (the concealment and revelation of the vagina by the patterned hair of the *mons pubis*). "*Lever* was jarring in its total lack of convention; not only in terms of materials, the lack of apparent structure, but in the absence of one correct perspective or focus."

— Dianne WALDMAN, *Carl Andre*<sup>8</sup>

Lane's major post-steel work, *Dirt Lace*, is her "Endless Column." *Dirt Lace* is a carpet of dirt that was sifted through a lace fabric directly onto the floor. The sifted dirt became a fragile lace. In a 2004 installation at Wynick/Tuck gallery in Toronto, *Dirt Lace* was placed tight between two walls. The hardwood floor shone through the lace, a pale flesh colour. Viewing access to the work — approximately 19 feet by 30 feet — was limited to one narrow end and one partial side entrance. (The *Dirt Lace* dimensions are variable.)

It begs superficial comparison with Walter De Maria's *New York Earth Room* (1977), but instead compare *Dirt Lace* with Carl Andre's seminal work, *Lever*, a single row of 173 unattached firebricks. *Lever* was installed at the Jewish Museum in New York such as to allow the viewer to approach it from either of

two directions. From one point of view it was possible to see the entire work, but only in receding perspective; from another, only the terminal portion was visible. It was impossible to reconstruct the work satisfactorily from all angles. Lane's *Dirt Lace* replicated the "jarring" discomfort of Andre's installation. This runs directly in the face of the limitations of irony and presents us instead with the real and the problematic. *Dirt Lace* could have been better seen as an object if it had been placed at some distance from each wall, perhaps even with a white substrate of some sort, but this would have been absurd, for the work derives its meaning from its constraints. Like the waist of Wolstenholme's *Buspar Column*, and the spinning cup of Forrest's *Stanley Cup/Washing Machine*, it produces a sculptural trope, an inventive juncture on which the axis of sculpture can turn, "a point where an invention occurs, where the language changes."<sup>9</sup> The awkwardness of *Dirt Lace* is a necessary constraint, an acceptance of, if not pleasure in the difficulty that follows both from the discipline of art production and its spectatorship. ←

Greg FORREST,  
Colleen WOLSTENHOLME  
Encomium, Toronto  
December 2004-January, 2005  
Cal LANE, *Dirt Lace*  
Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto  
November-December, 2004

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ciate Professor of Fine Arts at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

#### NOTES

- Ossip Zadkine, "Hommage à Brancusi." *Lettres françaises*, Paris, March 28, 1957; in Barbu Brezianu, *Brancusi in Romania*, Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1976, p. 135.
- Enno Develing, essay in *Carl Andre*, Exhibition Catalogue, Haags Gemeentemuseum, August 23 – October 5, 1969, p. 40.
- Hans Arp, in H.H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York, 1968, p. 301.
- Roland Barthes (transl. Richard Miller), *The Pleasure of the Text*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1975, p. 9-10.
- Both Forrest and Wolstenholme were losers of the Sobey Art Award competition (although finalists in different competitions). This contest, sponsored yearly by a grocery chain corporation, pits artist against artist in imaginary aesthetic combat, with the "best" artist selected as the winner by a board of curators (who are no doubt selected through some other mechanism). It is a microcosmic parody of the parochial Canadian art world. But recall also Leonard Cohen's reverential use of the term "loser" in his influential 1960's book *Beautiful Losers*. Consider that "losers" are often depicted in popular media as counter-culture heroes, a status somewhat comparable to the "Bohemian aristocracy" of the early modernists.
- Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Vol. 1: Form and Actuality*, 1918 (Oxford, 1991); "Patina," p.134.
- In personal conversation with the writer, New York City, 1975.
- Dianne Waldman, *Carl Andre*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1970, p. 19.
- Richard Serra, *Richard Serra Sculpture 1985-1998*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1999, p. 192.