



Magdalena Jetelová



Demystification of a Monument, 1989-1991
Cibachrome transparency & plexiglas,
wood, & soot.
Installation at Carnegie Mellon Art Gallery, Pittsburgh

Hermitage, Quiescence and Enigma

Magdalena Jetelová was born in Czechoslovakia in 1946 and lived in Prague most of her life. This is a crucial fact to keep in mind when examining her art. Czechoslovakia geographically bordering five European nations, occupies a curious crossroad position between the East and West. Because of the historical developments resulting from both World Wars, this nation was isolated and cut-off from twentieth century cultural developments. 'During the early decades of this century, Prague sheltered a community of Jewish, German, and Austrian intellectuals, who by writing about the Bohemian city and its people from a slight remove, gave it a perspective on itself that Czechs themselves have come to associate with the 'spirit of the place.' With the communist accession after World War II, however, Czechoslovakia was overtaken by provincialism.¹¹ Life there culturally, economically, and politically became restricted, and distorted: 'For the past forty years, the narration of Eastern and Central European history has been a distortion of a falsehood. During the lifetime of some Czech citizens the books have been rewritten five times. Havel has inscribed a moving testimony on the reduction of meaningful events to a calendar date....'¹²

Jetelová was part of a group of intellectuals who remained in Czechoslovakia, stood their ground and fought the wrongs of the Communist repressed system by continuing to make art for themselves and not the State. Her contact with the West during her formative years was brief. She studied in Italy between 1967-68, but returned to Czechoslovakia to live in a country beaten down after the uprising of the late sixties. Finally acknowledging that life had become intolerable for her as an artist, Jetelová did emigrate to Germany in 1985, after living in England for a short time.

Throughout the '70s when the breakdown of a dominant style in New York occurred and the influence of Post-Minimalism and Process art impacted on various aspects of American and European art, she continued working in a type of time warp relying on her inner strength

and sense of vision. Set apart from post-Modern theory and the proliferation of Western objects and gadgets, Jetelová developed a unique idiom devoid of consumer materialism: references to landscape, life's contradictory forces, medieval architecture and primitive culture co-exist within her essences of civilization.

'Many commentators have interpreted her paradoxical oversized wood sculptures...as metaphors for the deformation of her country under totalitarian rule.'¹³ Working in isolation afforded Jetelová a type of freedom to pursue unorthodox

techniques and develop a personal esthetic language. Living for decades in a deprived society separates Jetelová's from today's artists of commodity and the strategies of deconstruction.¹⁴ Thus, worldly goods, devalued signs of popular culture, and the cynical examination of the West's grandiose commercialism, are absent in her art. However, her art earlier characterized by its largeness and rawness of wooden construction, has become increasingly more complex with diverse elements now appearing in her constructions. Western influence has found its way into Jetelová's sites as she becomes exposed to and becomes more comfortable with new technologies and materials.

Hers is an art which operates on a higher plane. An underlying philosophical attitude pervades Jetelová's work, echoing the sensibility of a northern nineteenth century tradition. The contemplative mode of Caspar David Friedrich's isolated Gothic landscapes, which addresses man's reaction to the sublimity or terror of nature, informs Jetelová's enigmatic installations. An art from the West which perhaps parallels the work of Jetelová, is found in the archetypal explorations of Mary Miss. She too aspires to a reconnection of art and landscape and stresses the ephemerality of experience and the notion of time. Also a kinship is found in the work of Alice Aycock monuments which reveal a concern with the psychological implications of architectural sites: she too builds stage sets without plays, charged with psychological and mythological possibilities.

Jetelová's use of brute materials, production of precariously balanced structures, and creation of psychologically strained environments, harkens one to recurring themes about time passing and the viewer's relationship between site, structure, and experience. Over the past twenty years Jetelová's work has become characterized by possessing a co-existence of contrasting elements, a psychological transformation of space, and an allowance for order and chaos. Her unique architectural settings address existential concerns, human perception, and our intertwined involvement with time and the archeology of human memory. A powerful energy resonates throughout all of her art. It reveals her profound understanding of nature and the human predicament in a world turned up-side down and marred by greed.

I first became aware of Jetelová's work in 1987 at Documenta, where she presented *Determination's Other Side* (151 x 275 1/2"), a massive construction comprised of post and lintel components. I didn't realize at the time that this was a pivotal piece demonstrating Jetelová's gradual evolution away from the singular chair motif towards the development of architecturally integrated site-specific works which hint at dislocation. The Museum of Modern Art in 1987 first introduced Jetelová's art to the United States through its *Projects* series. There she exhibited *Boban* and *Crossing*. These two works are closely linked to the Documenta piece; both are constructed of rough wood and appear to stretch the boundaries of the original configuration. The former resembles a large alphabetical shape comprised of rough massive tree trunks. Writers often want to associate this form with being a chair; such a limited classification is cautioned against. In fact it is intended to function as a metaphoric symbol. The artist identified *Boban* as "a tale about energies



Table, 1988 (Tisch)
spo wood
114 x 106 1/4 x 61"
Installation at John Weber Gallery,
New York, 1987

and forces of life and matter, about the mystery of being and not being.¹⁰ In *Crossing*, a tenuous fragile bridge stands as a functionless structure purporting to be a bridge or path. Fragile, pole-like legs are placed to support a massive expanse of wood. However, their wobbly presence threatens the weight above. One wouldn't dare trespass upon this pathway to nowhere.

The sculpture from 1979 through 1987 is characterized as representational—huge chairs, looming legs, stairways to infinity, strange letters, and anatomical forms. Since 1987 her art has become more abstract with the singular form giving way to a more complex setting comprised of multiple components. Sculptural form and architectural space fuse, transforming a room into a fantastic environment. An example of this metamorphosis is observed in *Table*, 1988 and a *Domestication of a Pyramid*, 1989. Each of these site works demonstrate a mixing of a given reality of the actual architectural setting and its transformation through the juxtaposition of materials. One's comprehension of physical boundaries is pushed and each piece challenges the viewer's perception of reality and illusion.

The *Demystification of A Monument* presented at the Carnegie Mellon Art Gallery illustrates a further extension of Magdalena Jetelová's symbolic language and sculpture. Jetelová creates an atmosphere of ambiguous illusion. Geometry, technology, and chance unite in a carefully planned but open-ended structure. Unlike traditional monuments, Jetelová's does not belong to the past commemorating either a person or specific event. The work calls to mind associations with primitive culture, spiritualism, infinity, and mystery. A viewer might elect to associate the post and lintel wooden mass as an implied monument because of its physicality and sense of permanence. Furthermore the wood revealing scratches and indentations suggest architectural ruins from an era past, and its massive size and weight dwarfs the viewer.

Although it reads as an elusive structure, it is intended to be a place for private reflection instead of commemoration. Outside the space, one is a detached observer, but once inside, you must become a participant, an unidentified actor in the realm of the unknown. The viewer plays a vital role—s/he becomes an actor on a silent stage. Time passes as the experience unfolds and one moves through a cycle of time. Time is at the core of Magdalena Jetelová's art.

This disparate assemblage of wood, plexiglas, handwriting, and soot with the given interior space of the gallery creates a haunting presence. The effects of fire, scorching the wall and the wood, bond parts of the site. Although there exists three distinctive areas within the monument, each component of the installation is equal in importance to the other, even though they differ in mass, height, and length. The entire monument is developed along a triangular configuration employing the use of repetition: nine posts support two massive lintels; eight translucent screens form another side of the triangle (appearing to reflect the shape of the black wooden columns in the forefront); and a fifty-two foot wall expanse filled with a text, resembling hieroglyphic writings forms the base.

The wall mural depicts a handwritten excerpt from a poem which addresses the cyclical notion of time. Language mediates motion and the illusion of time's passing. The never ending stream of words written by the artist calls to mind a recording of someone's thoughts from an earlier era. It reads, "...time present and time past are both present in time future; time future contains time past." This never ending litany is suggestive of ritual chanting. However, the script is interrupted by charred soot which veils sections of the text. The deep, black background of the wall accentuates the philosophical message.

The delicate screen provides momentary relief from the strength of the vertical forms. The two-dimensional screen panels arranged in a zig-zagged diagonal emphasizes a sense of becoming a three-dimensional mass. This is in direct contradiction to their translucent character. They read like medical x-rays prompting one to examine their contents carefully. Within the atmospheric setting of a laser projected image, the artist presents a landscape which over time has been raped and destroyed by strip mining.

The strange and unreal qualities of Jetelová's dark, drawings made from soot and graphite become symbols for a moment just passed. Their seductive, rich blackness devoid of most recognizable details, lures one to close examination. No definite answers can be found in these ephemeral visual documents. These are not monuments about form, but vehicles for questioning human attitudes. They become extensions of her mysteriously, ambiguous creations and a pervasive existentialism. What we are presented with are types of puzzles. The complete picture can never be seen. Her method of withholding information is analogous to daily vision. The blink of an instant provides us with so little. Jetelová acknowledges that reality is an assortment of momentary fragments and she prompts her viewer to engage in a probing dialogue with the cycle of time.

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Domestication of a Pyramid, 1989
plywood, sand, metal carvings
145 x 145 x 140"
Installation at Galerie Jule Kewenig, Frechen,
West Germany, 1989