

sculpture

November 2008
Vol. 27 No. 9

International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org



Alyson Shotz Richard Serra Women and Land Art




SCULPTURE TODAY

A Conversation with

Alyson Shotz

BY ANJA CHÁVEZ

For the past decade, Alyson Shotz has created sculptures and installations for public and private spaces in which light, texture, and material evoke sensations of movement and dynamism and create new and unexpected visual perceptions. Widely shown in the United States, she has exhibited at a number of major institutions, including the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum (Ridgefield, Connecticut), the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York), the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, DC), the Jewish Museum (New York), the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (Wisconsin), the Rice University Art Gallery (Houston), and the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College (Saratoga Springs, New York). Shotz's work is included in major private and public collections such as the Whitney Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Yale University Art Gallery, where she was the Happy and Bob Doran Artist-in-Residence in 2007. Our conversation took place in anticipation of her current exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: "New Work: Zilvinas Kempinas, Alyson Shotz, Mary Temple" is on view through November 4, 2008.



The Structure of Light, 2008. Stainless steel wire, silvered glass beads, and aluminum, 10 x 17 x 10 ft.

Anja Chávez: *How would you describe your work process, and how important is your choice of materials?*

Alyson Shotz: I choose the material that best fits the idea—this is foremost. I don't have any set idea beforehand about what materials to use. I start with the idea, and if it seems to require cardboard to realize it, I use that; if it would be better in glass, then I use glass. I prefer to use non-typical art materials most of the time. I often have a negative physical reaction when I enter an art supply store. It is much more challenging and interesting to work with industrial suppliers of various sorts. This also keeps me learning new things on a constant basis, which I enjoy.

AC: *Do you sketch out your ideas or keep a notebook? What role do photography and computer technology play in your work?*

AS: I keep a notebook, but I don't consistently sketch my ideas. *The Structure of Light* (2008) was sketched quite a bit, but most of it was figured out by trial and error. Many times I'll make a computer rendering of some kind. I started using the computer in my work very early on, mainly for making my digital photographs. Later, I started using it for visualization as well. I don't know if I could have made my work the same way if I had come along 10 years earlier. The computer seems to be made for my way of thinking.

Photography has always played a big part in my work. I like the idea of cap-



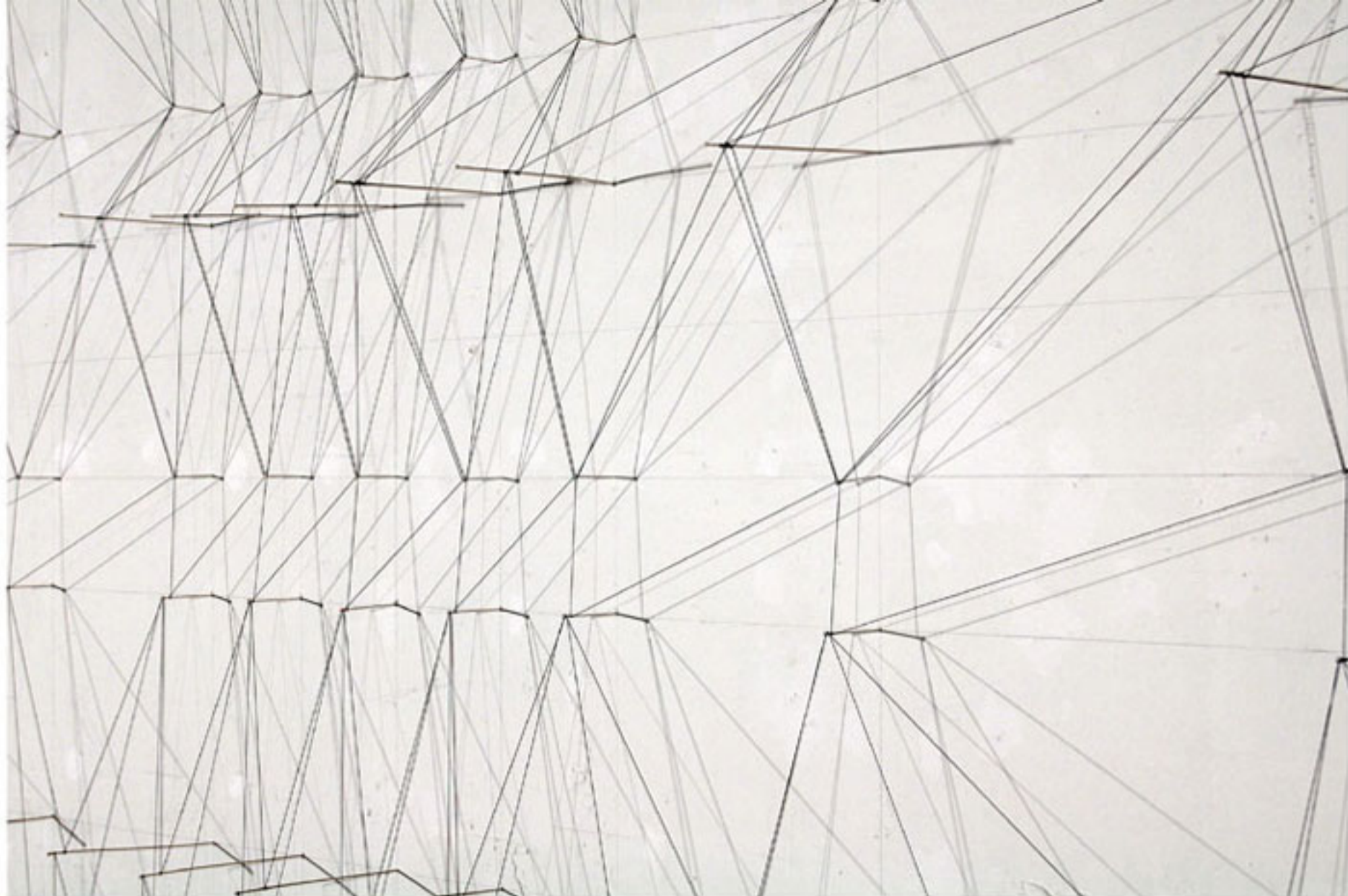
Above: *The Shape of Space*, 2004. Cut plastic Fresnel lens sheets and staples, 175 x 456 in. **Below:** *The Simple Forms*, 2004. Piano wire, epoxy, Sheetrock, and wood, 76 x 108 x 144 in.

turing "reality" and including it in something that is not "real" in a way that blurs the boundary between the real world and the created world. Also, something about capturing an image with a lens, or looking into a lens, is very potent, a sort of focused way of looking that I hope gets carried over into the sculpture.

AC: *When I saw your most recent work, The Structure of Light, in your Brooklyn studio, I was repeatedly struck by how it projects multiple images. From a distance, it seems to consist of long wires; but close up, it reveals small beads attached to the wire. The handmade aspect in your work appears to be rooted in a kind of craftsmanship. Is there a potential feminist reading for your use of beads (I am thinking of Rosemarie Trockel) that can be associated with femininity or perhaps childhood experiences? Or does your work reject biographical readings and themes in favor of redefining sculpture on a more formal level?*

AS: Craftsmanship is important to me. I like things to be made well. I appreciate craftsmanship in all kinds of things, so I would like to give that back to the viewer in my work. The beading didn't start with the idea of using beads, or of using a feminine material, but with the idea to make a kind of drawing in space that would also be sculptural. The beads I use, which are clear or silvered glass, also introduce light and change—something plain wire wouldn't do. The only way that feminism comes into it is in the way I conceive of a sculpture to begin with, which was originally in opposition to the way I perceived that men typically made sculpture up into the '60s. I was rejecting the heavy steel kind of sculpture that I saw and was taught in school. This all sounds very dated now, but I was educated by "'50s guys," in the period right before schools were required to hire diverse faculty, including women. Since the '90s all that has changed, but this was what I was reacting against, and I still think about it in a formal sense. For the past few years, I've been very interested in creating a spatial volume without mass. I'm interested in carving out or defining a space using almost nothing at all. I guess that would be in opposition to creating a space using a big hunk of metal or a lot of stuff.





Above: *Thread Drawing* (detail), 2008. Thread and pins on wall, 108 x 240 x 5 in. Below: *Reflective Mimicry*, 1996. C-print, 24 x 36 in.

I don't think there is any specific biographical reading in my work, although I have been influenced by art from all around the world. My father was an airline pilot, so we traveled quite a bit. Islamic art, Byzantine mosaics, and Indian textiles have influenced me just as much as art from the art world.

AC: I'm intrigued by your discussion of the role of space in your work. What is your definition of space?

AS: *Reflective Mimicry* (1996) investigates the boundaries of the body and the landscape. One becomes the other, flowing into the other. That was the beginning of my work with the topic. *Mirror Fence* (2003) reversed figure and ground: spaces seemed solid, and solid areas looked like something you could put your hand through. In *The Shape of Space* (2004) and *The Structure of Light* (2008), I am really trying to make the viewer feel a kind of layered space. I don't have a definition of space. I suppose that I'm trying to define it and understand it for myself. I often wonder about all of the space or air that surrounds us. We generally think of it as "nothing," but there is much more of it than there is of the stuff we think of as solid, so it must be important. I hope to bring these questions forward as something interesting to be considered.

AC: To come back to the image of the strong lines evoked by beads on wire in *The Structure of Light*, as well as *Thread Drawing* (2008), *Crystalline Structure* (2007), and other works, in what ways could your sculptures be said to be overtures to or reflections on the role of line in drawing?

AS: I'm really involved in combining drawing and sculpture, though not in every piece. However, early on in my work, I was very concerned with blending the boundaries between media—sculpture into video, drawing into video, sculpture into photography.

AC: *Reflective Mimicry* seems to have a performative side to it that relates to *The Simple Forms* (2004), which belongs to the string drawings.

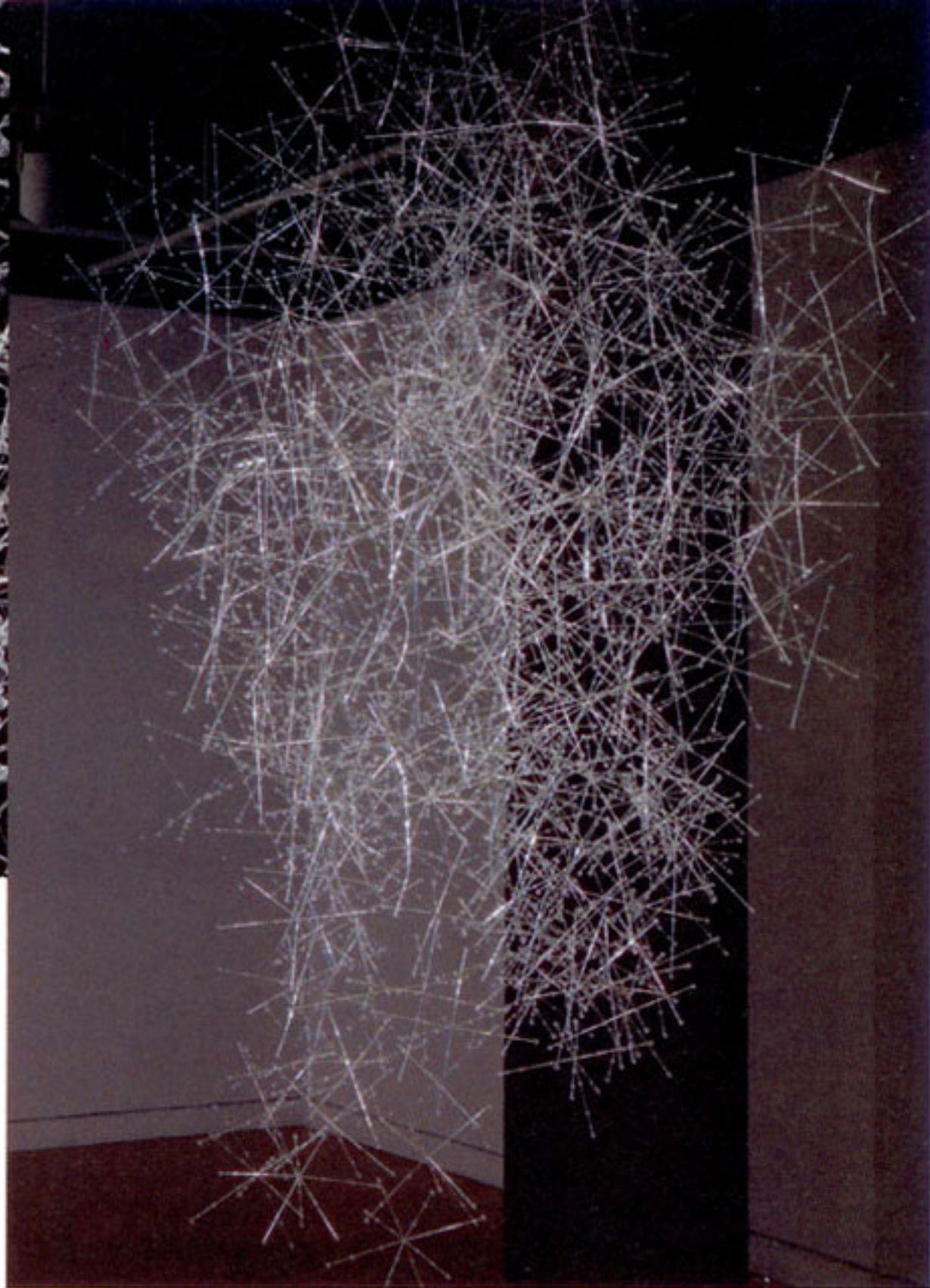
AS: The string drawings, including *Thread Drawing* (2008), are very much about the materials of drawing, the physical motion of drawing, and possibly the beauty of a line in itself. The thread reveals the action or the physicality of drawing. Also, the drawing

becomes illuminated in both the actual thread line, as well as in the shadow lines. The planes that are created are only implied and are like optical illusions.

AC: As an art historian, I'm intrigued by the similarities between the artistic practices that I see today and those of the 1970s. Both blur the boundaries between media. Are you interested in the same process in your work?

AS: I believe that when you decide to make a work, it doesn't matter what material you decide to use as long as it makes sense in the piece. There are very odd, false boundaries set up when one limits oneself to the use of wood or stone or whatever. This gets





into issues of craftsmanship, and maybe I don't see that type of craftsmanship as being a useful part of art. The idea is primary to me, not how well one uses this or that material. I need to limit my comments here to sculpture because painters seem to be a different beast. However, I started as a painter, and I felt very limited by the rectangle and the use of paint. What was so freeing in the art of the '70s was the idea that anything could become art—words, actions, a thought. This makes woodworking or stoneworking or even limiting oneself to sculpture or photography seem very antiquated notions.

AC: Do you see any affinity between your work and that of artists in the early 1970s? I could mention Fred Sandback or Gego as examples of drawing with sculpture.

AS: Yes, they have inspired me the most. I discovered them in my grad school years. Unfortunately, I didn't know about them earlier. I would say Sandback, but also Lygia Clark, Robert Smithson, Eva Hesse, Sol LeWitt, maybe Robert Irwin and Richard Serra (in terms of space).

AC: What was your specific interest in some of these artists?

AS: Lygia Clark and I share an interest in the relationship between artist and spectator. The spectator is involved in making my art what it is. Viewers become participants and even change the way the work

Above and detail: *Crystalline Structure*, 2007. Mixed media, dimensions variable.

looks when they are in front of it. Clark was very interested in the viewer as participant as well. However, I think she wanted the viewer to manipulate the work physically. I have experimented with that a bit in *The Simple Forms* (2004). For me, it is more an optical experience in which I want the viewer to participate—though that optical experience is only achieved through movement in and around the work. I love the *Bichos* and *Caminhando*, cutting the Möbius strip. Both have a complexity of shape and motion that I relate to. Also the sensorial hoods: I didn't know about them when I made *Reflective Mimicry*, but I think there is a relationship. My suit was a way of seeing with the body as well as a way of being invisible. I agree with Clark that the viewer can come to some kind of further knowing through experience.

AC: The major issues in your work appear to be redefining the role of light, changing viewer perceptions, and exploring optical illusions. *The Shape of Space* (2004), which was exhibited at the New York Guggenheim, for instance, brilliantly evokes the illusion of the flow of water through very different materials. To what extent might your interest in perception also be based in philosophies of perception?

AS: The viewer is the key to the work and the change that I want to be central to the work. I want a sculpture to be constantly changing, like a person or the weather. When something just is, one can know it too easily. I would like these objects to be unknowable in that sense. Light, time of day, and angle of view all contribute to this change.



Above: *A Moment in Time* (detail), 2005. Glass beads, bead crimps, monofilament, and steel grid, 22 x 16 x 16 ft. Below: *Two Viewing Scopes for Rockefeller Center*, 2006. Stainless steel tubes, glass and plastic lenses, and wood, 66 x 48 x 48 in.

Perception is another major influence in my work. When perception changes, a work of art has done its job as far as I'm concerned. I'm very interested in revealing our potential misperceptions in order to show that there may be much more to reality than what we see or perceive. It seems to me that we are physically put together in a particular way, and that physical body will inevitably shade our perception of the world, and even the scientific experiments we set up to find out about the world around us.

To give you an example of how perception has shaped my work: I had a very weird and disorienting experience many years ago in a car at night. I was looking up into the trees and the night sky was dark, the trees outlined in a darker black. Suddenly, they switched, and the trees looked like the sky and the sky like the trees. I couldn't tell which was which—they kept flipping, like one of those drawings of two faces that become a jar. Negative space became positive and positive negative.

AC: That's also what one experienced when looking through the public sculpture *Two Viewing Scopes for Rockefeller Center* (2006). Did you have that kind of experience in mind when you were working on it?

AS: The *Viewing Scopes* had multiple eyepieces, all with different lenses on the end and differing focal lengths. When one looks through them, it is impossible to see things from one perspective. Everything is shifted forward and back and spun around due to the mirror-polished surface inside each tube.

AC: What about the relationship between your sculptures and architecture? I'm thinking of works such as *The Simple Forms* (2004), *A Moment in Time* (2005), and *Transitional Objects in Two or Four Dimensions* (2006).

AS: The viewer/participant has to move through *The Simple Forms* to activate the sculpture. That's also the case in my permanent site-specific piece for Memorial Sloan-Kettering Research Center, *Transitional Objects in Two or Four Dimensions*. *A Moment in Time* is more about change in light/perspective and theories of time. It exemplifies, I think, the relationship between the two strands in my practice that have developed over the past few years. The second strand is art in architecture. I have been doing a series of permanent projects for public or semi-public spaces, and that has informed all of my other work to some extent. Working in a site-specific situation presents certain challenges that can inspire or constrain, or both. Because my work is about movement through space and

change over time, it has been beneficial for me to have these specific spaces to resolve.

AC: What role does your background in geology play in your work, and when did your interest in astrophysics originate?

AS: I was a geology major for two years as an undergrad before I transferred to RISD. I was planning to study glaciers and snow and am still fascinated by them today. I'm captivated with the mystery of this substance (water), which is one thing on a molecular level yet can undergo dramatic physical transformations (vapor, liquid water, ice or snow—with even more variations in between). In my first two years of undergrad, I also took some astrophysics courses. They were a requirement, but I found myself totally engaged by what was going on. We were learning about black holes, neutron stars, the Big Bang. These topics were, and still are, really intriguing to me, and I continue to read about new developments in the field with great interest. Questions about what the universe is made of (what is space, what is matter) seem primary to what sculpture, or for that matter art, should be about.

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