

# **Enclosing the Void**

**The Whitney Museum of American Art at  
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This exhibition was organized by Susan  
Lubowsky, Branch Director.

# Enclosing the Void

EIGHT

CONTEMPORARY

SCULPTORS

If one occupies oneself with . . . the object as positive form, the space around it is reduced to almost nothing. If one occupies oneself primarily with the space that surrounds the object, the object is reduced to almost nothing. What interests us most—what is outside or what is inside a form?—Pablo Picasso<sup>1</sup>

Envisioning sculpture as an enclosure of space rather than as a solid mass emphasizes the interior space as it is defined by exterior shape and surface. For the artists in this exhibition, internal space is conceived of as a positive, form-defining element, and surface as the skin that describes it. And in the subtle revelation of hollows and voids, an art about interiority has emerged—an art with emotional resonances that have been absent from contemporary mainstream sculpture. While critical attention was focused on artists who responded to such stimuli as the media and Pop culture, a smaller, less visible group of artists promoted natural, spiritual, and spatial phenomena as sculptural issues.

Prior to the seventeenth century, sculpture was conceived as a closed volume surrounded by space. It was Bernini who seems to have first introduced the concept of interior space, notably in religious subjects. In *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, the angel's garment clings closely to the body in delicate curves. St. Teresa's robe, by contrast, is an agitated, often angular mass of folded fabric that flows out from her body. This sense of space beneath the drapery speaks for the saint's interior life. Although her facial expression is calm, the excited surfaces of her garment evoke the physical pain and spiritual passion that accompanied her vision of the angel whose spear left her "afire with the love of God."

It was not until the early twentieth century, with the advent of modernism, that sculptors began to recognize space as a concrete formal element. These vanguard artists gave positive value to the void, and promoted a dialogue between space and form. Russian Constructivists first promulgated such theories in manifestos of the early twenties; in 1937, Naum Gabo wrote:

Up to now, the sculptors have preferred the mass and neglected . . . such an important component of mass as space. Space . . . was a spot in which volumes could be placed or projected. It had to surround masses. We consider space from an entirely different



Gianlorenzo Bernini  
*The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, 1645–52  
Cornaro Chapel, Sta. Maria della Vittoria, Rome

point of view. We consider it as an absolute sculptural element, released from any closed volume, and we represent it from inside with its own specific properties. . . . In our sculpture space . . . has become a malleable material element.<sup>2</sup>

For Constructivists, space could therefore be both enclosed and revealed. Artists associated with other modernist movements also addressed similar spatial issues. The Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti synthesized elements of Cubism and Surrealism in cage-like forms that he referred to as “open” sculptures. *The Invisible Object* depicts a totemic woman whose hands cup emptiness. Giacometti’s alternate title, *Mains Tenant le Vide* (*Hands Holding the Void*), is a homophone in French for “maintenant le vide” (“and now emptiness”). The pun not only articulated Giacometti’s avant-garde conception of space as form, but responded to what he felt was the absence of spiritual content in modern art. Like Bernini, he imagined space as an arena in which the mysteries of the soul are evoked by psychic energy turned inward.

During the 1960s and 1970s, installations and earthworks, which responded directly to their environments, furthered the Constructivist ideal of space as a sculptural element. But simultaneous aesthetic developments—primarily Minimalism’s insistence on the impersonality and objecthood of sculpture—dictated against content, rejecting emotion and obfuscating the spiritual. Minimalism’s hegemony was so pervasive that the sculpture of the next two decades was categorized under the generalized rubric of Post-Minimalism, even when it was infused with personal content. The art that emerged was often introspective, and certain sculptors used interior space to reflect psychic and spiritual states.

Jackie Winsor’s oeuvre has been characterized by minimally inspired geometric forms whose visual neutrality allows their hollow interiors to dominate. Her first cube, *Sheetrock Piece* (1976), in which eighteen pressed layers of sheetrock had a small square hole cut through the face of each side, established an ongoing theme. “Initially, I was trying to quiet the space—to approach my own inner self. Sheetrock was used to make a space that was as quiet and private as the experience of closing your eyes. The glimmerings of light that could be seen through the holes were the



Alberto Giacometti  
*The Invisible Object* (*Hands Holding the Void*), 1935  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.;  
The Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund



JACKIE WINSOR

*Blue Hemisphere, 1987*

passages inward.”<sup>13</sup> The four windows have remained a constant, appearing in later works such as *Blue Sphere* (1985–86). Like Bernini, Winsor creates an activated skin that embodies a spiritual idea, although hers is physically punctured to reveal the interior. And by perceiving of the void not as emptiness, but as “quiet,” Winsor unintentionally evokes the teachings of the saint Bernini immortalized. In her autobiography (1988), Teresa of Avila describes the second stage of prayer as the “Quiet”—the passive and introspective juncture before total consciousness is surrendered and the state of ecstasy is realized. But Winsor’s transcendence is not circumscribed by religion and extends itself to the viewer’s own experience. For Winsor, looking through the window is analogous to self-revelation. The physical self is excluded as the cube metaphorically replaces the body during the meditative process of entering into darkness. A recurrent dream inspired this series. In the dream, Winsor would notice a speck of light on the studio wall. Digging away at it, she created a larger and larger opening until her excavation yielded a room full of light, deep within the building. She claimed this undiscovered space as her own. The pieces that followed responded to her vision of blissful light, which for Winsor is akin to silence.

Recently, however, Winsor has opened up her work. “I wanted the inner to become outer, the concealed to become revealed and the silence to be bigger than the piece. There is strength hidden in the willingness to be vulnerable.” Bold pigmentation applied to the interior of *Blue Hemisphere* (1987) magnifies its intensity, overwhelming the gray exterior. Although inverted, its dome shape and hue allude to the sky, recalling cupolas of Renaissance and Baroque churches. The cast-concrete shell still defines the void, but now the emptiness is exposed and unprotected.

Spatial ambiguity and psychic introspection have always been major concerns for Martin Puryear. While his forms show an awareness of Minimalism, he, like Winsor, claims a spiritual heritage—one that connects him to tribal art and to modernists such as Picasso and Giacometti who appropriated primitive imagery. Puryear recalls that Giacometti’s *The Invisible Object* was a significant influence. Not only does it evoke the ethnographic models that have figured strongly in his development, but it also addresses the

issues of defining and containing space. And the enclosures that Puryear has focused on during the past decade have the introspective qualities of Giacometti’s sculpture.

*Sanctum* (1985) is one of a number of works whose scale and form recall habitations—whose interiors become a “place.” The title suggests a region of protection, but entrance is only visual, through a semi-transparent, wire-mesh shell that has been coated with a thin layer of tar. Although tar paper is a basic covering for simple shelters, Puryear’s application of tar is nonfunctional. He uses it sparingly, and not as a sealer, but as a means to conjure paradoxical associations. While tar’s smell and physical properties are unpleasant, the mesh form it is applied to alludes to both emotional and physical safety. “I’m interested in mediating between a feeling of massiveness and fragility to reach a point of extreme vulnerability. Wire mesh allows for all of this. It can appear massive and opaque, but is actually a thin veil.” It is the impact of space itself in that region of interior calm that expresses the idea of sanctuary in Puryear’s piece. Smaller works such as *Untitled* (1987) appear more objectlike. As part of a series called *Decoys* that imitate floating waterfowl, it focuses on the juxtaposition of open and closed forms and the spaces they contain. Puryear now applies the tar thickly, so that the viewer has more difficulty seeing inside the “body.” But the graceful neck that rises above it inscribes a circle, posing line against volume as the neck cuts through space.

Judith Shea’s sculpture relates specifically to the garments that enfold the human form. As hollow shells, her coverings imply the body within through gesture and modeling. Internal space is treated as a positive element whose energy pushes outward to suggest physical presence and internalized spirit. To Shea, “it is the absence that is the presence,” and that absence gives the work its poignance. Like Puryear, Shea is influenced by the aesthetics of other cultures, citing certain folk sculpture in which a hole in the chest or the forehead represents the path of the soul—the passing in and passing out of the spirit. Shea’s first trip to Greece in 1983 directed the course of her subsequent work. The Severe phase of classical Greek sculpture, particularly the pediment at Olympia, influenced her own reductive handling of pose and



MARTIN PURYEAR

*Untitled, 1987*

gesture. Shea evokes those figures in a contemporary idiom which emphasizes their inner nature.

*Black Dress* (1985) is Shea's first fully volumetric work—one that expresses a complete persona and has a modeled anatomy. Affinities with Greek statuary are apparent in its purity, posture, and monolithic stance atop a pedestal. Fabricated from wool felt saturated with India ink, the inside and outside have the same black, velvety surfaces, making access to the interior an enigma. And the dark void that is revealed emanates persona, emotion, and spirit. In *Private Tablet* (1986), the lower half of a bronze figure nestles around a slate wedge. The bend creates a darkness that partially obscures the interior, so that access is incomplete. In its fetal position and in the soft fold of fabric covering the stomach and groin, a state of "extreme vulnerability" is projected. But the wedge is volumetric, and its solidity grounds the empty shell. Informed by Shea's experience of living in a communal situation where her own values were contrary to those of the group, *Private Tablet* signifies the protection of personal ideals.

Robert Lobe also works with a limited set of representational images—trees and boulders have dominated his oeuvre since 1979. But for Lobe, as well as for John Duff and John Newman, the dynamics of natural phenomena subsume psycho-spiritual issues. Their art is inspired by nature and the cosmos; their strategy is exoteric rather than introspective. Yet Lobe alone works within the natural environment, molding aluminum sheeting around actual outcroppings of rock. The undifferentiated pattern of the landscape stimulates Lobe's thoughts about space, and isolating segments of that pattern becomes the basis of his conceptual process. For Lobe, the void is unrealized until the mold is removed and the work is installed. Only then does space replace real mass. "It is an environmental piece that is unborn when it is in its own environment." Lobe must intuit how the underside will take shape. Depicting no legible image, the inner surface confounds the information about trees and rocks relayed by the outside. Yet as a totality, the shell bears both the physical and spiritual imprint of a tangible form.

Lobe has always described volumes in terms of surface rather than mass. A 1981 piece entitled *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* simulates aspects of Bernini's

stone drapery—its surface is similarly activated to effect the sensation of a fleeting, levitating mass. Lobe's thin-skinned, hollow forms engender a sense of weightlessness, which he continued to pursue in a larger scale project, *Harmony Ridge #21* (1988). Mediating contradictions, he juxtaposes a delicate, draperylike surface against the coarser texture of the geometric volumes. While the boulder on the right (fabricated from heavier aluminum) supports the weight of the piece, the left side gracefully moves up and back into space. When installed, light filters through fissures in the shell, making the viewer aware of the emptiness as well as the surface. Moreover, the "space between the wall and the piece is very felt—it's a space that belongs to the object."

John Newman takes a less empirical view of nature, one inspired by the current conceptual revolution in the fields of physics and mathematics. At the crux of his aesthetic is a vision of reality as a dynamic, fluid, and paradoxical network of events and of space as a "cosmic web." Science and mathematics served "as a springboard to find ways of making the sculpture more emotional."<sup>4</sup> His path of inquiry led him to the area of mathematics known as topology, and he recognized the kinship between his own working process and the concept of topological equivalence. Newman's fabrications of volumetric shapes and curved surfaces from flat metal sheeting corresponded to an aspect of topology that deals with the deformation of surfaces: the idea that disparate shapes on a flat plane can be deformed to become equivalent shapes and volumes, providing that certain properties remain the same. A doughnut shape, for example, can be twisted and turned to form a coffee cup—the hole in the doughnut becoming the handle of the cup. "These mathematical concepts seemed to me resonant and evocative of emotional states."<sup>5</sup> The twisting, stretching, and knotting that he associates with topology is a corollary for the "emotional torque and physical engagement" of his own work.

*Inside the Cylindrical Mirror (Blue Glass)* (1988) expresses, in sculptural form, ideas about continuity and symmetry. Using the doughnut as a topological model, Newman built a complex form in which the doughnut is twisted, manipulated, and scooped out. Inside and outside share the same network of skin, which defines form and displaces space. The title refers



JUDITH SHEA

*Private Tablet*, 1986



ROBERT LOBE

*Harmony Ridge #21, 1988*

to an imagined visualization of a fourth dimension as a hollow doughnut in which the inside skin is mirrored and each image bounces off itself. As we picture ourselves within it, unable to escape, the mirrored doughnut becomes a metaphor for the existential experience of entrapment within one's own psyche. Although Newman had skirted emotional issues early on, his work became more emotionally charged after his mother's death. *Inside the Cylindrical Mirror* was developed from a drawing that reminded him of a pulsating heart, and of his father's recent heart attack. Privately subtitled for his father—*for John B. Newman*—the sculpture embraces personal feelings within a mathematical context. And the contradictions implicit in this relationship are manifested in the physical nature of the work—in the disparity between the fragile blown-glass heart shape and the obdurate metal undulations that enfold it. In the relationships between pockets of space and rounded surfaces, between the suggestion of an interchangeable exterior and interior, Newman finds a way to talk about the paradoxes of life without the limitation of a linear narrative.

John Duff, like Newman, acknowledges the paradigms of natural law, but draws on historical and ethnographic sources as well. In Duff's sculpture, forms channel inward. Holes, slits, and clear surfaces manifest his "conceptually transparent" approach—one which reveals as much information as possible about the inner nature of the work. Except for a six-year period during the 1970s, Duff has until recently worked exclusively in painted fiberglass, a material that allows for different gradations of transparency. He compares fiberglass to the skin of an organism, stretched over bone to describe the "structure shaping itself." Duff's technical process, too, is focused on the interior. A negative plaster mold is coated with fiberglass; once removed, it is assembled, altered, and often rearranged. The sections are sealed from inside, and paint is poured in through a hole. Although fiberglass is a high-tech material and might seem an incongruous choice to depict forms derived from natural structures, the inference is that art is man-made—that it can reconcile the organic to the technological. "The more subtly you perceive nature and the world, the more deeply and subtly you are connected to it and can act on it."<sup>6</sup>

*Sigismondo* is among Duff's few sculptures inspired by a mechanism unrelated to nature. Titled for the famous fifteenth-century soldier Sigismondo Malatesta, it alludes to the prince's helmet and breastplate. Nevertheless, there is an organic, insectlike quality to the rounded wing forms that project down from the "head." Originally, the piece was conceived as a closed volume. But Duff was displeased with its form and cut a slit up the middle to reveal the interior. By pulling open the mass, he created an intimate, quiet space, anomalous to the warlike nature of armor, but also akin to its function of enclosing and protecting as a second skin.

*Homoousian Cone I* (1987) presents a more ambiguous relationship between inner and outer surface, between enclosure and space. Beginning with a hollow cone, Duff inscribed a cut through its center, from top to bottom. Using the bottom as a hinge, he opened the two halves so that the left face is contiguous with the right. The cone is thus transformed into a thick sheet with interchangeable surfaces that spiral around space. The title of this piece refers to the Homoousians, a fourth-century Christian sect that held to the Orthodox doctrine that the Son and the Father are of the same substance. In lay terms, homoousian describes any two parts that share the same substance, like the halves of Duff's cone. The work's leitmotif is still the revelation of interior space, but space in this instance flows through the piece, never actually manifested or defined.

Although Heide Fasnacht has been exhibiting her wood sculpture since the late seventies, interiority has only recently become an issue in her work. As her volumetric solids grew, she found their size and weight did not allow for enlargement. She soon realized that pieces could be easily fabricated on a larger scale if they were hollow. Now she conceives of the hollow interior simultaneously with the building of the exterior—layering plywood as one would construct a topological model. Both the exterior and interior shape of each layer is pre-cut before the stacking occurs. One can envision such pieces as *Bearing* (1988) fragments of larger forms, and the openings at the ends as sites where the cuts have been made. This new process allows entrance into the interior of each form and also signals Fasnacht's willingness to reveal a greater emotional depth. Although jagged, blade-marked



JOHN NEWMAN

*Inside the Cylindrical Mirror (Blue Glass), 1988*



JOHN DUFF

*Sigismondo*, 1986-87



HEIDE FASNACHT

*Fieumaster*, 1988

surfaces have always indicated an element of anger in her work, she now takes a more meditative stance. Peering inside the passageways, the viewer enters a realm of darkness and calm, in contrast to the work's agitated exterior.

*Viewmaster*, also constructed this year, is a transitional work—the first in which the surface has not been manipulated. It is also an effort to extend a form that does not deflect back into the piece. Fasnacht related its appearance to optical instrumentation, and by coating the wood with graphite (which is used in the tool industry), she creates a metallic density that recalls machine technology. Although the surface is not easily penetrable, there are several apertures from which to look inside. Like the layering of each segment, meanings are also layered. “There’s an opacity and heaviness which does not mask the airy interior. Although this may seem contradictory, contradiction is reflective of emotional life—of one’s impulses being balanced by their opposites.” And the paradox is that the vision one sees inside the telescopic form is not of the external world, as the title indicates, but of a dim and quiet void.

At twenty-eight, Erik Levine matured under the tutelage of Post-Minimalism. Like Jackie Winsor, he works within a set vocabulary of geometric shapes whose interior spaces, he proposes, embody the transcendent idea of “nothing.” This concept has engaged Levine since childhood, when he would try to visualize nothingness. In an imaginary desert, he eliminated a person, tree, land, and sky, one by one, until nothing remained. “I’m much more interested in absence than in presence—in temporality and ephemerality, which a void also signifies.” Demarcating emptiness has been a focus of Levine’s recent work. His forms inscribe and often enclose space, but like Duff’s Homousian Cones, those which are open-ended allow space to pass through the work. Constructed from thin sheets of plywood laminated over a wooden armature, Levine’s process recalls the stretching of skin over bone. Yet while he sees his forms as skeletal structures, he does not want their surfaces to read as skin. Drips of glue and penciled notations provoke utilitarian associations with cabinetry, which mitigate spiritual interpretations.

But paradoxical situations have always engaged Levine. When he evokes a functional object such as

the wheel, it is often unfunctional. *Wheel Box No. 3* (1988), the most recent of an ongoing series, is a hybrid between a partially open box and a circular wheel shape. Yet were it to be propelled, the box would arrest its own motion at mid-rotation. From the side, *Wheel Box* appears to be a solid volume. But the frontal view is open and airy, inscribing a linear pattern in space. Despite such inherent contradictions, Levine’s approach to space is simple and direct. Without assigning meaning, content, or spirituality, he poetically defines the idea of the void as “nothing.”

Personal vision and referential subject matter have recently been re-acknowledged as valid departures from theoretically based aesthetics. While the intrinsic nature of sculpture has always been to displace space, the artists in this exhibition conceive space as a void to be described by, and enfolded within, their forms. Yet, as Naum Gabo posited, “We can only define space by space.”<sup>7</sup> The psychic impact of an art about interiority lies in this paradox. To realize a space that can never be fully contained or expressed, the artists here have chosen to look within—to the hollows of their forms and the depths of their spirit.

S U S A N L U B O W S K Y

1. Quoted in Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 219.
2. Quoted in J.L. Martin, B. Nicholson, and N. Gabo, eds., *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* (New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1937), pp. 106–07.
3. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in this essay are taken from the author’s conversations with the artists, August–September 1988.
4. Quoted in *John Newman: Curving the Plane*, exh. cat. (New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1988), p. 2.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Quoted in *John Duff: Recent Sculpture*, exh. cat. (New York: Blum Helman Gallery, 1986), p. 7.
7. Quoted in *Circle*, p. 107.

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ERIK LEVINE

*Wheel Box No. 3, 1988*

## Works in the Exhibition

*Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.*

### JOHN DUFF (b. 1943)

*Black Dahlia*, 1984  
Fiberglass and enamel paint,  
18½ x 22 x 46  
Blum Helman Gallery, New York

*Sigismondo*, 1986–87  
Fiberglass and enamel paint,  
57 x 16 x 14  
Collection of Wendy and Alan Hart

*Homoousian Cone I*, 1987  
Fiberglass and enamel paint,  
85 x 23 x 24¾  
Collection of Mr. and  
Mrs. Harry W. Anderson

### HEIDE FASNACHT (b. 1951)

*Bearing*, 1988  
Painted wood, 53 x 80 x 48  
Germans van Eck Gallery,  
New York

*Viewmaster*, 1988  
Wood and graphite,  
65½ x 64 x 37½  
High Museum of Art, Atlanta;  
Purchase with funds from the  
Lannan Foundation

### ERIK LEVINE (b. 1960)

*Ring*, 1988  
Wood, 59 x 59 x 47  
Diane Brown Gallery, New York

*Wheel Box No. 3*, 1988  
Wood, 74 x 28 x 54  
Diane Brown Gallery, New York

### ROBERT LOBE (b. 1945)

*A Nice Start and a Rotten Finish*,  
1983  
Anodized hammered aluminum,  
87¼ x 90 x 35  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo,  
New York; Gift of Mr. and  
Mrs. Armand J. Castellani, 1985

*Harmony Ridge #21*, 1988  
Anodized hammered aluminum,  
114 x 130 x 89  
Blum Helman Gallery, New York

### JOHN NEWMAN (b. 1952)

*La Peau de Chagrin*, 1985–86  
Waxed and lacquered aluminum,  
72 x 44 x 22  
Collection of Martin Sklar

*Inside the Cylindrical Mirror  
(Blue Glass)*, 1988  
Cast aluminum with patina,  
chemical dye, and mold-blown  
glass, 72 x 36 x 20  
Daniel Weinberg Gallery,  
Los Angeles

### MARTIN PURYEAR (b. 1941)

*Untitled*, 1987  
Wire mesh and tar,  
65½ x 76½ x 35½  
Collection of Vera List

### JUDITH SHEA (b. 1948)

*Black Dress*, 1983  
Wool felt and India ink,  
44½ x 15 x 12  
Collection of Raymond J. Learsy

*Girl*, 1983  
Bronze, 21½ x 14 x 9½  
Collection of Paul J.T. Sinclair

*Private Tablet*, 1986  
Bronze and slate, 11½ x 28 x 17½  
Collection of Steven  
and Gail Sidewater

### JACKIE WINSOR (b. 1941)

*Blue Sphere*, 1985–86  
Concrete, acrylic, and pigment,  
32 x 32 x 32  
The Rivendell Collection

*Blue Hemisphere*, 1987  
Concrete and pigment,  
21½ x 35 x 35  
Collection of Anne  
and William J. Hokin

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