

Sculpture on Stage

PART I: A Reading of Rosalind Krauss's Essay, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field'

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Rosalind Krauss's famous essay, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' (*October*, Spring 1979), should remind us, especially if we follow the advice she has given in the past, of the significance of university discourse in the development of the arts and, especially, critical theory about the arts. University discourse seems to be based, justifiably so, on the relations that tie signifiers together. This includes not just the brachiated trees of scientific knowledge as it has developed over the years but the continually re-cycled questions that swirl like a wind through these trees. Signifiers continually change their relations and also their own meanings, which are less the matter of determinative relationships with objective objects and conditions than 'meaning effects' that occur when certain signifiers, like planets, align to form a constellation.

Jacques Lacan, another of Krauss's significant sources, characterized university discourse and sometimes cited as central to the whole of psychoanalytic knowledge. The surprising thing about Lacan's formula is that the apparent product of this dynamic network of signifiers is not knowledge *per se* but a command, a command to 'Enjoy!', which suppresses the subject — one thinks students in particular since the *sub*-jects of a university are students — not because enjoyment takes time away from study but because the command is, so to speak, 'all she wrote'. It does not say what to enjoy, how to enjoy it, or what the reason for enjoyment might be. This puts knowledge into a peculiar ideological form. Its command is empty, and the puzzle of how to respond is unsettling. The command does not operate according to the rules of logic, history, or experience. It is, instead, the product of shadowy powerful forces that operate behind the scenes; manipulators who use knowledge to get us to do things in a certain way, to consume things to keep their economies going, to be happy enough to ignore the atrocities required for their efficient functioning.

The command to 'Enjoy!' is thus obscene, and in a sense art objects have excelled in this obscenity, putting us in the position where the set-ups for amusement, entertainment, and satisfaction are converted to produce discomfort, uncertainty, and anxiety. The one test of true art since the 1880s has been that, if it does not produce pain, at least in those who had expected something else, it is not authentic. The rule of *épatez les bourgeois!* The bourgeois were certainly ready for a little *épater* when this procedure was hatched, because art had already served to suppress and dull the senses, directing its version of 'Enjoy!' to cover over the evils of the Industrial Revolution.

'Feeling the pain' is one of art's obligations, and to simplify matters one could point to the Greek chorus as a group of hired mourners who did the audience's suffering for it, more artfully and deeply. Pain is what Krauss feels, on our behalf, when she cites the things calling themselves sculpture that put demands on our definitions. Like all choruses, she moralizes so that we don't have to. But, the chorus performs an extra function that we would miss if we did not attend to the formalities of university discourse. The formalities of Krauss's ideas might be overlooked if we forgot where they came in: in the pages of a journal that Krauss herself founded. In the university, journals guarantee the conjunctions of signifiers we call knowledge. They employ a system of reviews, filters, and checks that insure that what appears on their pages does not reward the rich or privileged, the insiders, or those who have a special arrangement. In this case, one of the facts of Krauss's essay has to be shown by the Lacanian formula,

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \underline{S2} & \rightarrow & \underline{a} \\ S1 & & \$ \end{array}$$

Namely, that Krauss is the S1 (master) behind the S2 (knowledge) because she was one of the co-founders of *October*, and that the command to 'Enjoy!' (*a*, the unsymbolizable *jouissance*) puts us at

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some difficulties (\$) because of its ambiguities. This is not an exercise to discredit Krauss's work or even the landmark essay, however. The formula for university discourse simply shows us where we are as readers: in the hands of academic 'mastery', a performer in a show directed by a impresario who says simply 'get out there and make them laugh'. That is, Krauss is not performing, we are. Our enjoyment inverts our position as readers; it puts us on the intellectual hot-seat. If we don't understand we have simply not performed well. The standard of performance is not revealed, but we can be sure that we will come up short.

The question of 'what is sculpture?' is the ideological component requiring impresario efforts. We are led through the categories: Russian *avant-garde*, European modernism, the abstract artists of the 40s and 50s leading to the outrages of the 60s and 70s. Are these reminders or instructions to restrict our own review to some standard stepping-stones, an academic narrative that has organized our grief for us so that meaningful discussion can take place. Although critics had expanded their own fields to authenticate the increasingly *outré* works of the 60s and 70s (Nazca lines, Toltec ball-courts), the reader is held to a higher standard. We read *October* as the flagship of the academic way of seeing art, launched to establish a more reasoned basis than that provided by the New York elitists (Hilton Kramer, Barnett Newman, *et alia*) who had run things until help was sought from the French Foreign Legion. The immediate results and lasting contribution was that the field of criticism was democratized. Graduate students could make their own way by citing sources, connecting ideas, and looking at art. With the appropriate letters of introduction, they could get into all the collections they needed to piece together the facts. More important, they could think more freely about the whole experience of art, relate it to a broader range of cultural life. The new system vanquished many abuses, but didn't it also fall into the same patterns of patronage? Doesn't a landmark essay in a journal, by the editor rather than an anonymous author, carry the weight of a 'master signifier' working behind the scenes?

Master signifiers work by leaving out things. Typically, they get us into a room without letting us look long enough at the doorway. The doorway in this case is the word 'sculpture', treated as a territory forced to admit immigrants without proper papers. These immigrants come in, sponsored by critics with improbable stories of legitimacy. They are cousins; reliable workers; future or present spouses; only temporary; a treasure of great magnitude; a political refugee; an oppressed minority; a victim of a holocaust. We must accept them, but we know in our hearts that the argument is a cover. The natives are being overwhelmed by outsiders. This anxiety, though, has a back-story. The natives were never really natives. They came into the land by the same subterfuges they now here, justifying the latest generation of wetbacks. Their resistance to the newcomers covers up their own legitimacy questions. S1 is never confident about its ability to order S2. It always prefers to stay behind a curtain, like the Wizard of Oz.²

Thus, the 'nativist' definition of sculpture: 'As is true of any other convention, sculpture has its own internal logic, its own set of rules ...' In other words, sculpture is a contract that binds an 'us'. That us is a territory that, if invaded, should be defended. Krauss slips into the language of the courtroom: 'I would submit'; 'it would seem'. The subject of sentences becomes the conspiratorial 'we': 'we had thought'; 'we were saving'; 'we know very well'. Her evidence becomes self-evidence: 'There is nothing very mysterious about this logic'. It's logical! So, when the logic begins to fail (Rodin's *Gates of Hell* and *Balzac*), Krauss clicks the slides. Significantly, she focuses on the *base*, the 'stage' upon which sculpture struts and frets its hour. As a good Lacanian, Krauss should have thought at least once about the Mirror Stage, the point at which the young child conceives of a self-existence based on separation and anxiety — the fuel and oxygen of fantasy. She must have realized that the other key requirement, the spark, was ... was ... (?)

Lacan is pretty specific about the spark, and he gives it a graphic form that allies it with both the emptiness and authenticity of the gap between the subject and the reflected image of the subject in the mirror: \diamond , also written as $\langle \rangle$, 'both less than and greater than'. Don't Rodin's sculptures

² That the institutional background of theory and criticism involves a form of 'racization' is not intended as an incendiary charge but rather one to note how the subject of criticism has become ... the subject itself. That the demand for the subject to be happy (successful, alert to change, etc.) is a conversion of claims that formerly applied to races is the thesis of Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2008).

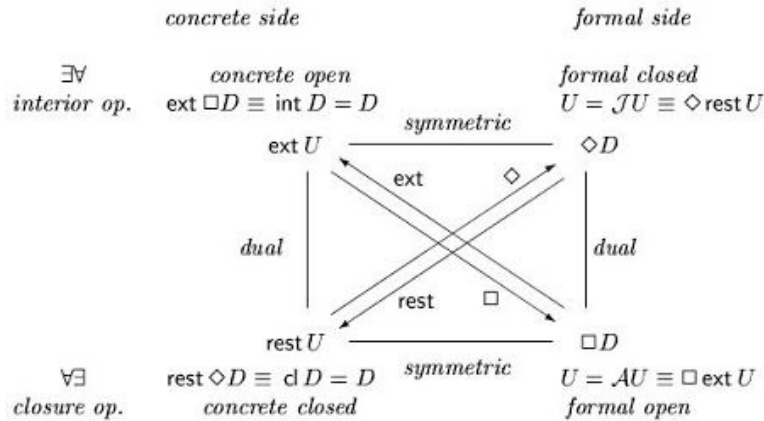
constitute precisely this *poinçon* condition? In terms of precisely locating the 'negation of a negation' that has, from Biblical and Classical writings onward, cited the boundary between death and life as *the* position of authenticity, the line from which — to either side — humans have imagined the greatest number of intense narrations, and in such precise 'Lacanian' terms that Krauss, as a good Lacanian, should have picked up on her own citation's significance. On the Hades side, there are narrations of separation: death narratives, the famous motif of descent, *katabasis*, Dante's *Divina Comedia*. On this side of the portal, narratives of anxiety in which the living subject finds inscribed, at his/her heart, an appointment with death. These two conditions also mark the principal logics of the uncanny as formulated by Ernst Jentsch in his classic 1909 essay — the very work that inspired Freud to conduct his own study of the uncanny.

Despite the location of these work at the *center* — albeit a center defined by void and negation — of the Western canon, Krauss sees a departure, a 'nomadism' based on the lack of a base, a token of the 'homelessness' of these and subsequent works. And, despite the relation of the base, in negative or positive forms, to Lacan's Mirror Stage, the missing base is not the center of subjectivity's troublesome central void as Lacan would have it, but the opposite. We have, in this use of the base as an off/on sign of modernism, a tawdry comparison. The lack of a base signals 'placelessness'; the fetishization of the base (Brancusi) is modernism's self-absorption.

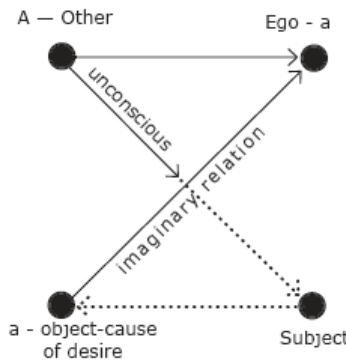
Krauss moves to the negative position taken by sculpture that, located in the landscape, makes a minimal distinction from it but does not assert an architecture. This is not mediation, but it is a creation of a kind of *templum*, a cross: a place determined not monumentally but by difference. Krauss uses the things sculpture differentiates itself from as determining factors. As 'not landscape' the sculpture asserts a scale although it retains some qualities as a frame. As 'not architecture', it does not house or shelter; it does not, like a monument would, symbolize through form or mark a location. Yet, a site is established by the experience of the work: perceiving it, walking around it, occupying parts of it; later, remembering it; all of these combine architecture and landscape, sometimes by literal mirroring, but in the negative way Krauss emphasizes.

But, then Krauss goes further. the opposition between the built and the unbuilt (architecture and landscape?) are 'strict oppositions'. Not only this, but they token the strict opposition between the cultural and the natural. Isn't this going too far too fast? Too many readers might formalize a system of captions at this point that would make one forget that nature is a cultural construct, and that culture has 'natural' components that cannot be assimilated by systems of meaning and interpretation. She herself uses a criss-cross terminology in a trial definition of landscape as 'non-architecture' and architecture as 'non-landscape'. At this point, it would be obvious to a card-carrying Lacanian that we have a case of double inscription. Two terms, conventionally defined by their opposition, turn out to 'criss-cross' so that one appears uncannily at the heart of the other. Architecture is thus A_L ('architecture with landscape inscribed at its core, albeit in negative, transformative terms') and landscape is L_A ('nature as structured in a way that, at every scale, we find a demonic kernel of architectural order that resists randomness'). Further in this Lacanian vein, we would connect the landscape as that interval 'between the two deaths' that is the hallmark of separation motifs and see, in architecture, the signature of anxiety: an appointment with death. We are brought to the same point from two different directions, and that point is Rodin's *Gates of Hell*. At the same time, other works use the same logic without such a direct reference to this point as a portal: the baseless sculpture; the sculpture-less base; the not-landscape architecture and not-architectural landscape.

While Krauss succeeds in restoring terms (landscape, architecture) that were formerly excluded by sculpture in the 'post-Renaissance' period, but she must do this by finding a villain responsible for disconnecting art criticism from the traditions in which the landscape-building (labyrinth, Japanese garden) was not only accepted but the norm. Work that clearly connects to these traditions (William Morris, Carl Andre, Robert Smithson, Alice Aycock) is 'released on bond' by the mathematical model beloved by structuralists, the Klein four-group:



Krauss's version is simpler, but the question must be asked: given the easy access to Lacan's L-scheme,



... which specifies an imaginary relation between the ego and the object-cause of desire, and an unconscious relation between the 'Other' (the BIG Other, the framework invented by the subject to be the source of all 'unreasonable' demands) and the subject, always the barred subject, \$... why Krauss did not, as she did in *The Optical Unconscious* (1994), declare a dividend or at least a two-for-one sale in this earlier essay. The L-scheme does not allow the easy transfer of labels that Krauss accomplishes, fitting landscape and architecture into a system of structuralist oppositions. But, it does show that a criss-cross rather than the creation of hybrid conditions ('marked landscape', 'site construction', 'axiomatic structure'). Initially, the hybrid conditions are more appealing and, seemingly, more useful. They provide 'names in advance' for things that are readily supplied by the last quarter-century of the history of art and architecture.

The question is: do we prefer a criticism that results in a set of clear if provocative labels or a criticism that explains things? The Klein four-group focuses on objects, Lacan's L-scheme on the life of the subject, the structure of our *experience*. We might say that the Klein model is for objects distinguished by their settings and roles. Lacan's model ... what is it good for?

My argument is that Lacan's criss-cross takes up the original distinction Krauss finds useful and takes it to the level of a 'subjective objectivity' and subjective objects. And, in the process of double inscription that requires a cross-over symmetry, the subject is 'objectified'; we see objects in terms of their relations to our experience rather than each other, and subjects not as individuals with particular different tastes and opportunities but as *subjectivity per se*. Krauss is right to point back to the Renaissance as the last time the subject enjoyed such a venue. The Renaissance, rediscovering the key texts of Plato and formulating a humanism that gave as much credit to magic as to science, found

the idea of a collective and universal memory intriguing. That knowledge proceeded from this memory (the theory of *anamnesis*) followed logically. In cross-over terms, imagination and memory were the same.³

There is a subtle difference between the historicism that eventually traps Krauss (she has to distinguish radical turning points and create a 'post-modernism' that is both identical with and different from modernism) and the 'radical historicity' that Fredric Jameson requires for all critical theory. Although both Jameson and Krauss initially favored four-square distinctions of the object domain that helped 'label the options' which, when taken, initiated new eras of production, Jameson realized that the real unconscious of history was a radically political unconscious — i.e. in unconscious grounded in an ideology of the subject. This ideology is the basis for Lacan's idea of the four discourses (University, Master-Slave, Analysis, Hysteric) and the L-scheme relating the criss-cross of ego and *object*-cause of desire, the Other, and the subject. The unconscious constructs 'master signifiers' that, though they organize the chains of signifiers, they themselves stand outside of language and, indeed, all attempts at symbolization or relations of logic. Comparable to what in rhetoric is called the 'enthymeme' (the syllogism relating the speaker and the audience), they work through this resistance to meaning but paradoxically then become the centers of meaning. The master signifier is the 'gate of hell', the 'empty' and 'negative' but 'central' and 'critical' *crux coronae spinarum* (cross of the crown of thorns in Biblical imagery) that is both problematic and revolutionary.

Krauss's essay omits a beginning and an end. The beginning is the concealed operation of 'university discourse' whereby Krauss herself operates as a master signifier, S1, outside the field of signifiers that, in the journal *October*, transfers the discourse of the masters to that of the University. The essay asks us to 'Enjoy!' the problematic works in the expanded field of sculpture that is, alternatively, site constructions, axiomatic structures, marked sites, or sculptures proper. The labeling is satisfying and stabilizing, but it begs the question of how the distinctions arose in the first place. Doesn't the citation of Rodin's *Gates of Hell* set the bar for this, by being a case of the Lacanian 'extimate' — neither inside nor outside, an instance of divine formlessness in Bataille's radical sense? If Krauss remains behind the curtain, we must expect that the magic diagram of the four-group will be explicated no further than its obscure origins in Structuralism's lore. Why Krauss did not head in the direction of Lacan's subjective topologies, where the criss-cross would combine the spatial programs of the extimate (which have many correlates in works of art from across the historical and cultural spectrums) as well as the motifs of the uncanny, which promise to connect art of the Western elite to the traditions of ethnology and ritual world-wide, is not knowable. From behind the curtain, it may be more important to control an influential journal than to give away the keys to the temple, but for critical theory to move forward, the field must become the stage, both the Mirror Stage of its own self-consciousness and the 'field' on to which we may map the evidence of the clinic and history at the same time.

This critique is a bit harsh on Krauss, who should be commended for having done so much to bring critical theory into the mainstream, and for having expanded the terms of theory to include the active and polymorphous *actual* interests of practicing artists. But, it must be said that Krauss's final omission, a symmetrical match of her first, is that of the potential of the theory that she famously espoused. The missed opportunity to realize fully a theory of the subject not in abstract terms but to combine the Freudian-Lacanian clinic and the field of actual art practices is truly a loss that could have generated new energy not just in art *schools* but in artists themselves. It would have transferred criticism from the university to the studio. Krauss's expanded field did not expand enough. It made us forget about 'the dog that did not bark in the night' and, hence, the unifying themes that make all artists one artist and all ages one age. Multiplicity should not suffer for such an expanded field.

³ This was a central insight of Giambattista Vico who, in his *New Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976), characterized imagination as a 'retroactive' form of memory. Indicators that many scholars realized this peculiarly Renaissance insight is evident in the number of them who devised theories of history based on it, and were distinguished from attempts to assimilate culture to mechanical, biological, or natural processes without becoming teleologically deterministic. Vico, for example, used the randomness of cultural and historical conditions to 'prove' the universality of the processes by which perception created its own unconscious in strict adherence to a sequence of 'gods, heroes, and men' (the 'ideal eternal history').