

Eva Rothschild

The artist discusses the objects, ideas and artworks that have shaped her thinking.

With an introduction by *Declan Long*

OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES, Eva Rothschild has created an ever-updating ensemble cast of sculptural characters. Her boldly zig-zagging and skinny, stripy, precariously propped-up forms appear to have strong, stand-alone personalities – variously antic and assertive, enigmatic and energetic – but they are profoundly interdependent. In a 2010 interview with Laura Hoptman (the curator of painting and sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art), Rothschild emphasized the essential, compare-and-contrast complementarity of her sculptures: 'I tend to think of the works together as a group,' she said, and so the task of gauging 'what they might need materially' requires sensitivity to what others in their company 'might lack or benefit from'.¹ Her works are always, in this sense, under each other's influence.

Often, this spirit of practical reciprocity is evident in the arrived-at forms of individual pieces. Skeletal pedestals connect or contrast with the sharp, spiky figures and bulbous, perforated shapes they support. Single sculptures are generally composed of identifiably distinct segments (piled-high rolls of coloured-cast gaffer tape, Jesmonite blocks or beaded, plaster-and-polystyrene orbs, for instance), while the clear, firm, black lines of certain structures are patterned with punchy colours that defiantly break up visual continuity (as in *Empire*, 2011, her Public Art Fund commission for New York's Central Park, now on display in Minneapolis at the Walker Art Center's sculpture garden). There is a persistent emphasis on plurality and multi-part assembly: nothing can be just one, settled, self-contained, wholly unified thing.

An Array (2016) – featured in 'Alternative to Power', Rothschild's 2016 show at The New Art Gallery, Walsall – is typical, too: a closely grouped cluster of jet-black sculptural volumes, in an assortment of styles, collectively perched on a low platform. Solid, stubby cylinders, roughly ridged at the sides, share the constrained space with slender, see-through, steel-frame structures and other, peculiarly precious-looking handmade things: some like deflated footballs, bizarrely and beautifully wrapped in intricate beading; another like a tangled hose, bundled loosely into an irregular sphere, but toughened and lusciously lacquered. Posing together on their polished platform, these pieces become a statement of close-knit diversity: a family photo of Rothschild's art. As its title suggests, *An Array* is a displayed selection, an indicative sample, maybe, of enduring interests and necessary back-and-forth antinomies: the towering, teetering presence of block-on-block columns; the drawing-in-space of open-work construction; the fundamental perfection of basic geometric shapes; the mystery and allusiveness of more organically imprecise objects; the luxurious, inhuman sheen of glossy surfaces; the chance effects of daily, methodical, studio-based handcrafting.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Eva Rothschild, *An Array*, 2016, installation view at The New Art Gallery, Walsall. Courtesy: the artist, 303 Gallery, New York, The Modern Institute /Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich, and The New Art Gallery, Walsall; photograph: Robert Glowacki

This monochromatic 'array' exemplifies something of the fastidious, measured variety – the controlled, intelligent play – advanced by Rothschild throughout her career. (During this time, she has moved from her home town of Dublin to Belfast, where she studied at art college, then on to Glasgow, spending formative years within that city's industrious 1990s art scene, and on again to London, where she now lives.) But it's worth noting, perhaps, how that word 'array' has other relevant associations: denoting, for instance, both dressed-up adornment and marshalled military power. Rothschild's sculptures, at their most outgoing, can similarly suggest combinations of the flamboyant and the forceful. Frequently, their spatially commanding verticality evokes the authority – and, often, the absurd extravagance – of outlandish buildings and grand monuments. Ancient or antique styles of architecture are, in particular, an abiding influence (along with the esoteric bodies of knowledge they relate to). But many of her striding, arching and stretching forms also occasionally express something of the way power still declares itself materially: through structures and symbols that dominate, demarcate or selectively decorate our public spaces. As such, sometimes, Rothschild's crookedly minimal creations hint – in their melancholy and mischievous, plaintive and protean oddity – at the unrealizable fantasy of permanence that underpins vaulting visions of authority.

1 Laura Hoptman, 'Laura Hoptman and Eva Rothschild in Conversation', in *Eva Rothschild*, Stuart Shave/Modern Art and Koenig Books, London, 2010



ART ON TV

Sometime in the mid-1970s, as a young child, I turned on the TV and there it was: *Christo's Valley Curtain* (1974), a documentary directed by Albert and David Maysles about Christo and Jeanne-Claude installing their newest work in the Colorado mountains. I didn't know what it was; I was astonished by the urgency, the sense of endeavour, the excitement and then the magnificent curtain, billowing across the valley, something arrived at and completed for its own sake. I didn't know what I had encountered. It took me until I was at art school to make the connection, because there was no context in which I could put what I had seen. I thought about it a lot, for many years. It was an amazing thing to see as a child, just experiencing it as a pure, joyous, material possibility.

YELLOW

It seemed like paper was always in short supply when I was growing up in Dublin, so I used to get my mother, who was a radiographer, to bring home the bright yellow Kodak end-papers that were included with the X-ray films. Almost all of my drawings were made on both sides of this yellow paper. Although I developed a subsequent hatred for the colour, it has managed to creep into my work in recent years, often making a tentative appearance only to be covered by my beloved red and green: essential opposites.

STRANGE DAYS

I went to art school in Belfast from 1990 to 1993. An obtuse choice, but I wanted to move out of home and it was free – unlike the colleges in the Irish Republic. My initial encounter with Belfast was harsh. I moved into a house on a street with the wrong coloured pavements for my southern accent (communities in Northern Ireland often paint the kerbstones red, white and blue or green, white and orange to indicate their political affiliations) and, along with my housemates, was forced out in a matter of weeks by spray-can 'bombs', uninvited guests and sectarian graffiti on the front door. Things improved, though, and I stayed on to do my degree. It's hard to convey how cut-off from the world it felt being in Belfast at that time: in a city with so many of its own concerns, it felt like the outside world didn't really exist. In terms of looking at contemporary art, even at art school there was no frame of reference, no way into the present, no sense of being located in a wider world of artists. Everything we could lay our hands on outside of our own making seemed to be in the past.

Perhaps as a result of this, I became fascinated by the politics of protest, especially in relation to the hippy movement and its limitations – as documented in critiques of its idealism and naivety by writers such as Joan Didion (in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 1968, and *The White Album*, 1979). With this in mind, in the summer of 1992, I went to San Francisco. Unfortunately, once there, I continued my bad streak of housing choices; this culminated in a police siege and the arrest of one of my room-mates. I was pretty disillusioned on my return to Belfast; I couldn't find anything in the process of making art that provided me with a means to communicate the things I was feeling. It all seemed so emptied out.

“Visiting the Jantar Mantar in Delhi is like stepping inside an M.C. Escher drawing.”

At this moment in time, on a tutor's desk – not in the library – I came across a copy of the documenta 9 catalogue (1992) and, specifically, the work of Cady Noland. Her essay ‘Towards a Metalanguage of Evil’ (1989) led me to seek out everything I could of her work. It seemed to embody both my experiences and my desires for what art could do and what it could be. Her work showed me that art could have a presence and hardness that was alive and angry but economical and tough, and, crucially, was not based in gestural expressionism. All of the action and intent was taking place through the materials, every move and placement releasing the latent power of the world the objects came from. Seeing those works changed everything for me. It took me years before I could approach making or a real engagement with objects in my own practice – but encountering Noland's work shifted my whole axis of artistic understanding and possibility.

Visiting the Jantar Mantar in Delhi – 13 architectural astronomy instruments built in 1724 – is like stepping inside an M.C. Escher drawing. Impossible, double-stepped curved structures rise into nothing, ramps lead down into bisected spheres and the gigantic gnomon – known gloriously as the ‘Supreme Instrument’ – is a huge triangle with a 39-metre stairway on the hypotenuse culminating in a 21-metre drop. I went there in 2001 while I was working on a show at the Crafts Museum in New Delhi. I felt like a tourist: everything was unfamiliar and difficult; time slowed down because I couldn't take anything for granted. It's a truism to say the unfamiliarity of travel makes everything strange, but the Jantar Mantar has a strangeness and an impact that transcends such glibness. It's a huge, intelligent machine you can actually enter, a computer laid out in a park. It is both a fantasy made real and a folly with an explicit purpose. Architecturally, it embodies the principle of form following function and, yet, its manifestation is miles away from the buildings we associate with that modernist mantra, demonstrating how a change in the idea of what constitutes desirable function can transform the physical world.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Christo and
Jeanne-Claude, *Valley
Curtain*, Rifle, Colorado,
1970–72. Courtesy:
© Christo; photograph:
Wolfgang Volz/laif/
Camera Press

BELOW

Jantar Mantar
observatory, Delhi,
1982. Courtesy:
© Marc Riboud
and Magnum Photos,
London



*“In thinking about what remains to us from the ancient world,
I wonder if what will outlive us will not necessarily be the things
we value but the things we throw away.”*



'FROM THE TOP OF THE GREAT PYRAMID, GIZA, EGYPT'

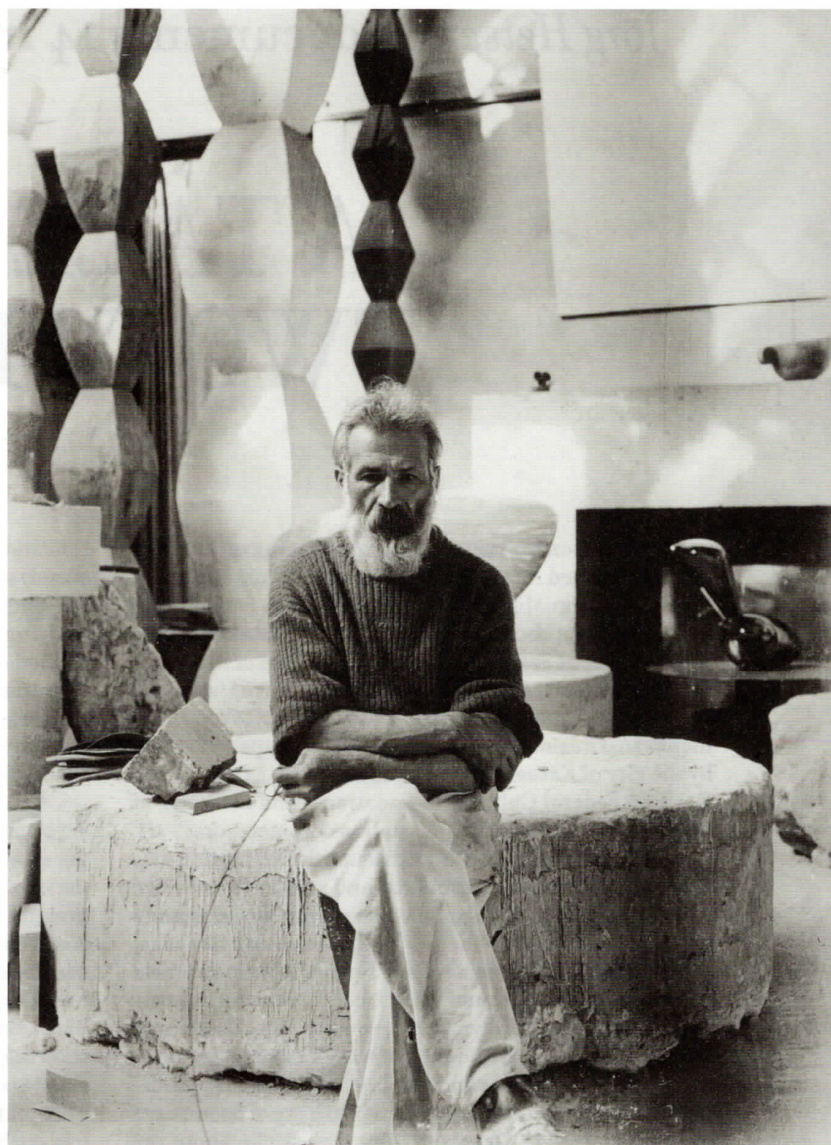
My father went to London in 1972 to visit the Tutankhamun exhibition at the British Museum. He brought back the catalogue and one of my earliest memories is of hours spent looking at the pictures, imagining myself in the place of Howard Carter, finding what he called the 'wonderful things' and being subsequently cursed forever. I have never been to Giza or to the Valley of the Kings but Lee Miller's photograph *From the Top of the Great Pyramid, Giza, Egypt* (1937) has now become my ideal image of this combination of the imaginative and the architectural. Miller's photograph is profound because it doesn't depict the object itself but makes explicit the aura and presence of the object, beyond its materiality: the sphere of influence such a powerful structure exerts upon its environment both psychically and physically, and, in turn, on our imagination.

MATERIAL ANXIETY

I am very much a material-based sculptor; I make things and I engage with the processes very directly. In making, I think about materiality a great deal: properties, possibilities and longevity. Increasingly, this thinking is mixed with a sense of dread that builds in relation to the huge volumes of disposable materiality for which we seem to have a collective blind spot. I feel like our ideas of permanence are still linked with archaic ideas of the monumental: Stonehenge, the pyramids or the fallen columns of the ancient Greeks. We somehow maintain a sense of a hierarchy of materials – what we see as solid or of value – while drowning in a fragmented synthetic materiality. This sense of unknown materiality terrifies me. Materials that trick us into believing they are entirely transient; the frighteningly disingenuous nature of plastic wrappings and fillers. A particular focus for me has become the polystyrene blocks that you find everywhere (from our built environment to our food): they all share an assumed inertness that asks us to pretend that they don't exist, to ignore them as invisible. Casting from these materials has become part of my practice. I want to make something explicit about the contradictions between the idea of the disposable and the material reality of these objects. In thinking about what remains to us from the ancient world, I wonder if what will outlive us will not necessarily be the things we value but the things we throw away.

CONSTANTIN BRÂNCUȘI AND BARBARA HEPWORTH: ADDITIVE AND SUBRACTIVE

Opposite the Barbara Hepworth Museum in St Ives, Cornwall, is the old Palais de Danse, which was Hepworth's second studio. Through a chance meeting in 2009 with the caretaker, while participating in 'The Dark Monarch' exhibition at Tate, I was taken to visit it. This was my Howard Carter moment, totally unmediated: wonderful things indeed. An actual ballroom full of sculptures, templates for the *Single Form* (1961–64) drawn out on the floor and a dusty Labour Party membership card resting on a desk. Everything about the studio had a sense of purpose and practicality: it was as if Hepworth had just left. Across the road in the museum there is an ebony carving of the artist's first son – she was mother to him and to younger triplets. I had been thinking about Hepworth and her practice as a female artist prior to this encounter, but being in her studio and feeling the sense of purpose and determination there, combined with the maternal tenderness of



ABOVE
Constantin Brâncuși
photographed in his
Paris studio, c.1933–34,
gelatin silver print,
12 × 9 cm. Courtesy:
Centre Pompidou,
Paris, and RMN, Paris

OPPOSITE PAGE
Lee Miller, *From the Top
of the Great Pyramid,
Giza, Egypt*, 1937, black
and white photograph.
Courtesy: Lee Miller
Archives

this intensely personal work, gave me a totally different connection to her practice, a sense of life lived through making. I think of Hepworth and Brâncuși's work in terms of the additive and the subtractive, one so rooted in carving, releasing the art object from the unformed whole, and the other always accumulating and switching diverse elements. While I feel for Hepworth's practice, I actively hate the idea of a 'whole work' – a complete object that does everything on its own and is never subject to change – and so Brâncuși's processes resonate more with me. His work, despite being so canonical, always has an air of incompleteness. His studio, though, like Francis Bacon's in Dublin, is very different to Hepworth's. It's a kind of theatre, seductively glamouring us with its clichés of the genius creator. It's like a fantasy of what a 'real' artist's studio should be, a weird archetype perhaps, but still one with a kind of truth to it – because it houses his objects. Materially, everything is present: laid out full of potential, humming with a sense that they are just waiting to be deployed. Brâncuși's is an alphabet with which you could say anything, but only in a very specific language ●

EVA ROTHSCHILD lives in London, UK. In 2016, she had solo shows at The New Art Gallery, Walsall, UK, and Sonneveld House, Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Her exhibition with Cary Webb at Galeria Mário Sequeira, Braga, Portugal, runs until 18 September. Her solo show 'A Material Enlightenment' opens at 303 Gallery, New York, USA, on 15 September.