



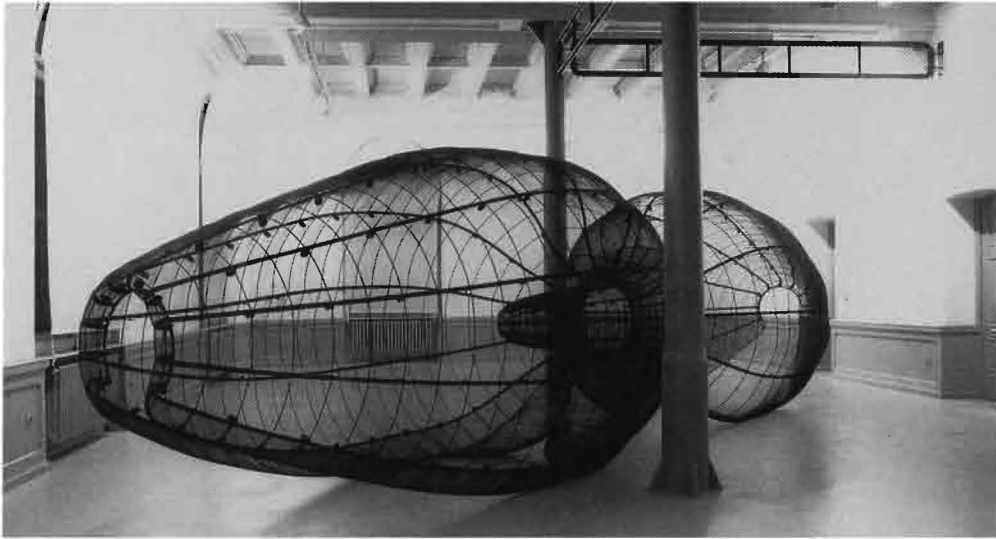
# **Kendall Buster: Sitelines and Suitors**

**July 30–October 24, 1999**

Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art

**K**endall Buster's large-scale sculptures exist somewhere between object and architecture, functioning as both sights and sites. Experienced visually, they appear as autonomous, self-contained entities, decidedly abstract yet evocative of machine parts or manufactured devices. Experienced with the body, they become architectural shapers of space. Their openings invite the viewer to become a visitor, physically entering the sculpture to experience it not as a thing but as a place.

For the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Buster has created an installation entitled *Sitelines and Suitors*. The installation comprises two large sculptures, constructed on site in the Museum from modules crafted in the artist's studio. Each of the structures has been put together in the same manner. Bent and welded steel rods form the mod-



*Long Pierce*, 1997; steel, netting; 78 x 78 x 360; installation at Bahnhof Westend, Berlin

ules, which are then bolted together to constitute an outer skeleton. Inside the skeleton, a second metal frame defines an interior space. Thin, membrane-like coverings are stretched over both the exo- and endoskeletons. The white-enameled steel framework of one sculpture is covered with sheets of white paper, stiffened with size (a gluey medium) that makes them taut like drum heads. The other sculpture's two structures have raw steel frames over which are stretched charcoal gray screening. Differences in color and material create a dynamic relationship between the sculptures, played out through dichotomies of light and dark, translucency and transparency.

Like many modernist sculptors, Buster creates shapes that can be appreciated as purely abstract forms, but that also possess a "strong associative principle," calling to mind a variety of other objects.<sup>1</sup> The white sculpture in the Kemper Museum installation stretches across the floor in the rough shape of the letter Y, its arms resembling blimps and its stem a bottleneck. Buoyant and pneumatic, it suggests two airships that have come to light on the gallery floor. The black sculpture is two virtually identical bottle-like shapes, one standing upright and the other on its side. Compared with their white partner, they have a more menacing character, evoking giant traps or cages.

Buster also associates them with canisters used to hold volatile gas or explosives.

Canisters and blimps are containers whose interiors are normally inaccessible, but Buster's sculptures feature portals that permit entry and exploration of their interior spaces. These interiors are defined by wall planes that are flatter than those of the curving outer shells, imparting to them the character of architectural chambers. Adding to this architectural aspect are window-like openings at the sculptures' extremities that provide visual passages between interior and exterior. These windows and the portals create the sightlines suggested by the installation's title.

Buster seeks to create a tension between the desire to be embraced by her sculptures and the simultaneous fear of being trapped inside them. Low entries oblige many

people to bend down to enter both the white sculpture and the horizontal side of the black sculpture, increasing the visitors' awareness of their own bodies in relation to the "body" of the work of art. A person entering the white sculpture is enveloped by a paper architecture at once smothering and fragile, and may sense what the artist calls an "oppressive tenderness." According to the artist, occupying the cage-like vertical and horizontal structures may feel like standing in a silo or a rifle barrel, respectively.

Entry into Buster's creations may produce sensations that are unfamiliar, even uncomfortable. Among these may be the awareness of being looked at by people outside the sculpture, which may give rise to a certain degree of self-consciousness. People

inside the black sculpture can not only see out of the screened walls but are also visible through them. Those inside the white structure are largely concealed but still perceptible as shadowy presences through the paper membranes, and are directly visible through the sculpture's door and windows.

Issues of visibility and the power of vision have engaged Buster since the mid-1980s, when she read Jacques Lacan's theories of the gaze and Michel Foucault's analysis of modern surveillance. Lacan argued that the human subject is alienated from itself through its awareness of the gaze—a gaze that reduces the self to an object seen by others. In Lacan's words, "You never look at me from this place from which I see you." Conversely, "what I look at is never what I wish to see."<sup>2</sup> Foucault found a powerful architectural manifestation of modern surveillance in the panopticon. Invented by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century, the panopticon was a circular prison with a central tower that permitted the constant oversight of inmates while fostering in them a sense of their subjection to the "sovereign gaze."<sup>3</sup>

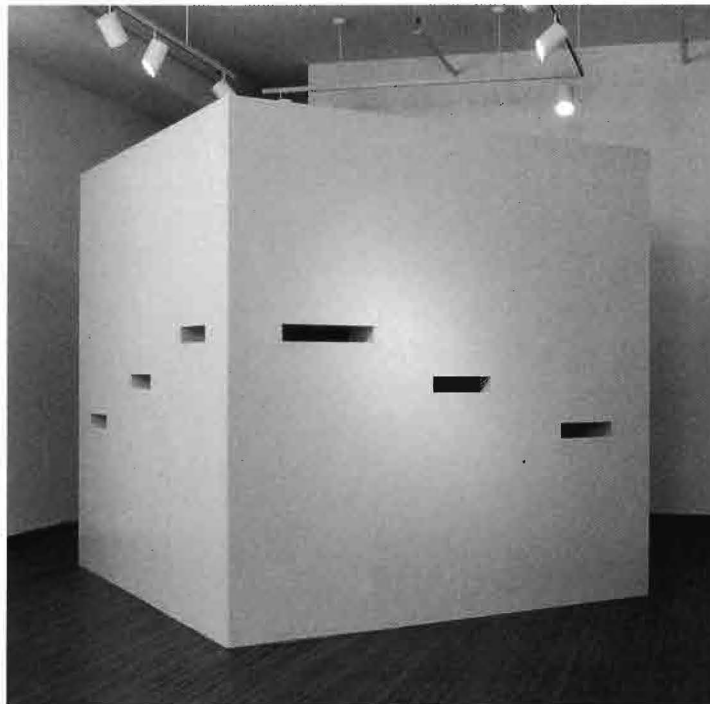
Buster explored the dynamic of the gaze and the related dialectic of enclosure and disclosure through an untitled piece she built at the Diane Brown Gallery in New

York in 1986. A cubic structure with a maze-like interior of narrow corridors, its walls were perforated by slits at various levels affording sightlines from within as well as from without, and providing, according to the artist, "an element of voyeurism." In the late 1980s Buster created more hermetic pieces—large sheet metal structures that resembled both organisms and machines. These sculptures were tightly sealed except for small openings that suggested peepholes for an unseen presence lurking within. By the early 1990s Buster was covering curving steel frames with metal plates to create chambered structures resembling armored vehicles, with door-like openings into their interiors and slits in their walls. As the decade progressed Buster adopted paper, screening, and greenhouse netting as coverings for her metal skeletons, incorporating gradations of transparency of the sort she continues to explore today.

With *Double Chalice: Joined and Separated* (1996) and *Long Pierce* (1997), Buster introduced implicit sexual content into her art.<sup>4</sup> Each of these works consists of a pair of screen-covered steel skeletons, open to entry on either end and interlocking at the center. The composition suggests, in Buster's words, a "mating machine," with the circular opening of the female side receiving the probe of the male element. Depending upon which side of the sculpture the visitor enters, he or she may identify either with the penetrator or the penetrated.

For her Kemper Museum installation Buster initially considered a further exploration of sexual dualism through the creation of three sculptures that would be designated the "bride" and the "bachelors." This concept was informed by Buster's reading of Marcel Duchamp's notes on his seminal work of art, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, whose imagery of what Buster calls "mechanical courtship" has long fascinated the sculptor. Buster decided, however, to endow her sculptures with both male and female aspects—phallic and womblike. She also replaced the terms "bride" and "bachelors" with the single word, "suitor."

The word "suitor" usually denotes a man who courts a woman, but since Buster's sculptures are both male and female, each of them may play suitor to the other. Furthermore, they also beckon to the visitor, who becomes the suitor and, as Buster says, "enters into courtship with these objects." The desire to enter the sculptures, to burrow into their bodies, to feel oneself enveloped by them, can be powerfully erotic. The web of sightlines



**left:** *Untitled*, 1986; wallboard, enamel; 120 x 120 x 120; installation at Diane Brown Gallery, New York, NY

**above:** *Untitled*, 1986 (interior detail)

cutting through the sculptures also activates what Buster calls "the eroticism of looking, and being looked at." From both inside and out the viewer is additionally seduced by the handcrafted quality of the sculptures, sensually rewarding both on the level of overall form and in the details of the materials and technique. Ultimately, the experience of Kendall Buster's *Sitelines and Suitors* renews our awareness of the fundamental connection between art and eros—the wellspring of life itself.

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#### Notes

- 1 This and all other quotations from the artist are from a series of conversations with the author during June 1999.
- 2 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Norton, 1981), p. 103. See chaps. 6–9 for further discussion.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Vintage, 1979), p. 317, note. See pp. 195–228 for further discussion.
- 4 *Double Chalice: Joined and Separated*, probably Buster's best known work to date, is illustrated and reviewed in Ferdinand Protzman, "Galleries: Branching Out from Child's Play," *Washington Post*, February 10, 1996, p. C2; Rex Weil, "Reviews: Kendall Buster," *Art News* 95 (May 1996): 140; and Sarah Tanguy, "Emerging Sculptor: Kendall Buster," *Sculpture* 15 (May/June 1996): 14–15.

*This exhibition was organized by Dana Self, Curator of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, as part of the ongoing Projects Series exhibitions.*



above and cover: *Sitelines and Suitors*, 1999, steel, paper, Dacron; 84 x 300 x 300 inches; and 2 components, steel, netting, 156 x 108 x 108 inches, 108 x 180 x 108 inches; installation at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO. photos: Dan Wayne

## Artist Biography

Born and raised in rural Alabama, Kendall Buster studied microbiology and medical technology at the University of Alabama, receiving her B.S. in 1976. After moving to Washington, D.C., she became interested in contemporary art and in 1978 enrolled at the Corcoran School of Art, earning her B.F.A. in 1981. Relocating to New York, Buster participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program in 1984–85, and in 1987 earned her M.F.A. from Yale University. In 1990 Buster returned to Washington to accept a teaching position at the Corcoran. Since 1981 her work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions in New York; Washington, D.C.; Baltimore; Richmond; Pittsburgh; and other American cities; and also abroad in Berlin, Germany; Lima, Peru; and Durban, South Africa.

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