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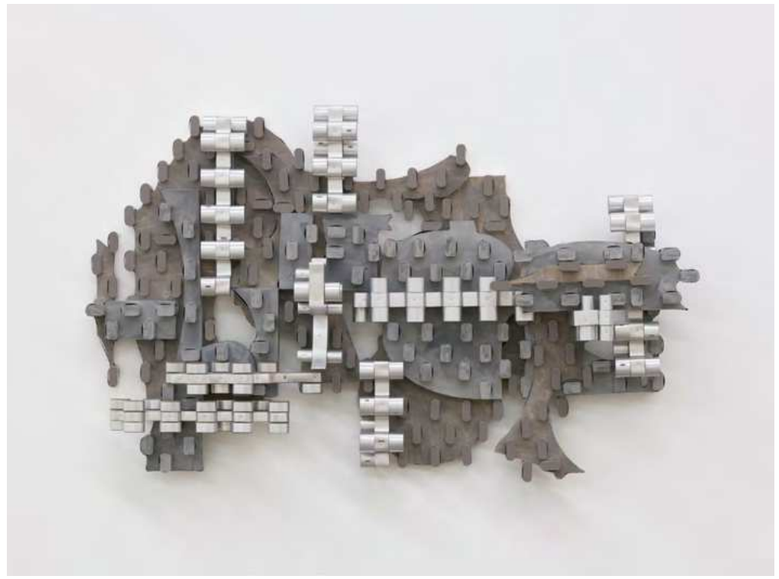

ANNE LIBBY

IN CONVERSATION WITH MELINDA LANG

Winged Victory (Beige Sand), 2015, polyethylene, powder-coated steel, 167.64 × 152.4 × 10.16cm. Opposite: *Untitled*, 2019, plywood, pigmented urethane, aluminum Venetian blinds, formica

Anne Libby's enigmatic works conjure visions of sprawling metropolises and gleaming mechanical parts. Inspired by architectural and ornamental styles, Libby employs manufactured, household items including folding tables, window blinds, and formica, alongside organic materials, to produce uncanny abstract arrangements. Her intricate wall reliefs, sculptures, and quilts — all of which are highly attentive to texture, color, and reflectivity — investigate connections between mass production and craft, and more recently, symbols of power in the built environment. Since 2015, Libby's sculptures have originated as detailed drawings that in turn serve as blueprints for machine-cut, decorative motifs. Knob-like ovals, excised from plastic tabletops using a CNC router — a computer-controlled cutting machine, are meticulously embellished by hand with formica, pigment, or ceramic glaze, and at times, delicately wrapped with aluminum blinds. The resulting works feature a nearly obsessive accumulation of repeated forms in a constellation of interlocking planes and metallic hues.

I first saw Anne's work in an exhibition in 2017 that featured her sculptures alongside works by Barry Le Va and Peter Nagy. This three-person show — presented at Magenta Plains in New York — placed her in a cross-generational dialogue with two significant senior male figures. I was struck by the formal and conceptual correspondences between Le Va's diagrammatic drawings of his *Scatter* installations and Libby's precisely laid, patterned assemblages, both of which share an emphasis on process and materials. Likewise, Nagy's graphic schematics of institutional floor plans are echoed in the younger artist's darkly architectonic forms. While engaging with techniques of seriality, like Le Va and Nagy, Libby has developed a distinctive vocabulary drawn from wide-ranging sources including Art Nouveau, Minimalism, Science Fiction, and psychedelia.

Around the time of this show, I was introduced to Anne at ZAK's — a one-night only project space run by artist Zak Kitnick from his Brooklyn studio. Zak has presented works by several of his friends and peers, including Anne, in an effort to foster a community of younger artists. These lively evenings function as both an alternative forum for art and an opportunity for social gathering. It was here that Anne and I had the first of many discussions about her work, the art world, and artmaking, more broadly. The following interview, which took place when Anne was in LA and I was in New York, unfolded over several conversations by phone, email, text message, and a shared Google Doc.

ML You've recently been spending more time in LA, where you grew up, after several years in New York. I find that LA continues to be a fascinating antidote to New York (and vice versa), and for artists, each city presents different advantages and disadvantages. Since you're there now (while I'm in New York), I'm interested to hear how you're feeling about LA at this moment.

AL It's so new that I'm hesitant to know. I'm lucky to be in touch with so many more artists out here now, which is a really nice change. But, also like a lot of New Yorkers, I find LA a little bit isolating, in part, because you are unlikely to run into someone you know on the street. I think I'm enjoying the solitude for the time being.

ML Right, the sense of isolation one might feel in LA is very different from the kind that some people experience in New York. We tend to associate feelings of alienation, in crowds or cramped apartment buildings, with New York living. But in LA, people can feel acutely disconnected from others. It's a little disquieting, especially for New Yorkers (myself included).

In many ways, your work has been inspired by your New York surroundings. Has LA had an impact on the direction of your latest work, or changed how you feel about future work?

AL I often think about the different urban landscapes in New York versus LA. For me, development in New York is defined by a kind of hallucinatory capitalism that evokes a sense of anxiety. The introduction of the skyscraper, which is closely tied to capitalism, dramatically changed the experience of New York in the twentieth century. Recently, in my work, I've been thinking about the city's extreme verticality. LA is also impacted by urbanism and capitalism, of course, but in response to our profit-driven system, people there tend to seek a sense of 'transcendence' from it. Unlike New York, LA is a laterally expanding city. It feels as though its moving outward, aggressively, toward its physical boundaries.

ML During some of our first conversations, I was struck by the types of subjects that have informed your work. A few of the broader topics we have discussed include Art Nouveau, Aldous Huxley, and the aesthetics of psychedelia. Can you talk more about some of these influences?

Nagy / Libby / Le Va (Installation View), Magenta Plains, 2017, materials variable, dimensions variable

AL I definitely start with a spark of an idea and then see what is revealed to me during the art making process. So, it's a balancing act between the historical and cultural references that are interesting to me and then letting that go as I consider new aesthetic possibilities. We're living in such a rapidly evolving technological time that looking back to think about the present feels particularly useful right now.

The style of Art Nouveau emerged from an anxiety between the ornamental and craft, and the production of mass-produced items. The idea that something decorative could also be inexpensively and quickly made, using modern materials, was particularly radical then. Similarly, in the contemporary moment there is a tension between the 'artisanal' or 'handmade' and the digital and modern mass production technologies that try to subsume these craft-oriented techniques. The impulses, production methods, and aesthetics of Art Nouveau feel especially relevant to my work, so I often return to them as reference points.

ML The motifs in your table-based sculptures from 2015 also have a surprising affinity with Art Nouveau. To create these earlier works, you produced carefully rendered drawings based on the contours of the folding table's collapsed legs. These designs were then transferred to the table's surface by cutting into it with a CNC router. Since then, you've developed other ways of employing the tables as a sculptural material in your work (the tables are often used to create repeating oval patterns). Do you think of these early works, in which you first used folding tables, as an origin point for your current sculptures?

Earthflash (Installation View), 2018, materials variable, dimensions variable

AL These works opened things up for me and I pulled a lot of ideas from them. I think the work in many ways is so linear and it often leads to other possibilities. I continue to add and subtract different adjectives.

The deconstructed folding table works articulated some things I'd been thinking about in a way that felt very concise and communicative for me. These works — which resemble gates or space dividers — have an imposing presence when installed, and they allowed me to think more about the relationship between architecture and the viewer. At this time, I started working with utilitarian and ornamental forms, and I became interested in both revealing and transforming their manufactured origins. The table or desktop felt like a very contemporary space to explore — a sort of mental or conceptual space where a different kind of labor happens.

ML You also began incorporating rolls of laminated seaweed in your sculptures in 2015. As you've pointed out, the sheets of seaweed in these works often bring to mind paper scrolls and conveyor belts. I recall you mentioning that your interest in Art Nouveau led you to experiment with seaweed, is that right?

AL The seaweed works developed simultaneously to the early table sculptures, and I feel they are related in many ways. I had been looking at Nori, which are sheets of compressed seaweed, and I was struck by the visual connections between the transparency of the Nori and stained glass. I also like that despite its natural origins, Nori is ultimately a manufactured product. Around the same time, I learned that seaweed imagery is a common Art Nouveau motif because of its sinuous, biomorphic shape.

ML Your sculptures primarily consist of mass-produced materials that are often transformed into ornate patterns. You've also integrated more traditionally decorative materials including hand-cast glass and ceramic elements. Can you speak more about your interest in blurring the boundaries between the decorative and the utilitarian in your work?

AL I think pushing familiar objects toward an inspection of aesthetics is part of the appeal. And then to situate the making of utilitarian objects within art making.

ML I find it interesting that you've described your digitally machine-cut oval motifs, which derive from prefabricated tabletops, as thumbprints — a term that suggests a more human character. Does this form have personal associations for you? Where did it come from?

AL I found this oval shaped unit while in the process of cutting into the structure of a plastic table. It had this directionality that you wouldn't arrive at without intensely calculating for efficiency (it's not a circle or a square). And it reminded me of something organic and decorative despite its otherwise less distinctive qualities. I imagined that it could grow outward and live on the surface, allowing the sculptures to have these more unique parts"

Ultimately, I think this motif has to do with understanding mass produced objects as histories — where these forms and materials come from, what they are comprised of, and who might have made them. And then repositioning that in some more human way.

ML On first glance, your sculptures impart a sleek, machine-made look that belies the meticulous handmade labor involved in their making. Can you discuss your process and the amount of time and energy that goes into a single work?

AL Some works are incredibly quick to produce while others require a more extensive process. The handmade elements do take quite a long time and are physically intense, especially when they're incorporated into larger works. But I typically have a lengthy drawing process that happens digitally and is very calculated, and then I work more intuitively with the physical materials.

ML Right. Your work ultimately comes together through a more intuitive process. As a result, there's an almost collage-like feel to the layering of textures, hues, and materials in your work, especially your horizontal floor sculptures.

What drew you to use mass-produced items like formica and aluminum window blinds in your sculptures?

AL With the blinds, they are tools for urban experience — ways of controlling privacy and light. They become stand-ins for the outside and often mitigate our experience of the exterior world in very significant ways. These strips of aluminum are pretty uniformly employed to allow light or deny it.

Formica was also a really interesting material for me to think about. It is mass produced but customizable. It creates a really industrial and impermeable work surface but is also superficial and decorative. It also has a certain relationship to being 'low end' when compared to marble or granite.

ML You're often working on a number of different sculptural forms at any given time. For example, you've created low-lying horizontal sculptures, vertical freestanding towers, wall-mounted reliefs, and most recently, quilts. Are you continuing to move between these types of objects?

The Cannibal Dynamic, 2018, plywood, pigmented urethane, venetian blinds, formica

AL Yes, I like being able to work on a few things at once. I end up combining these different bodies of work not only in installations but also within individual works, so I like to stick with variety.

ML You're sensitive to the reflective properties of your materials — a tendency associated with the work of West Coast Light and Space artists. Are you interested in this legacy?

AL Works produced by Light and Space artists are certainly interesting to me. My works don't incorporate light as a material, but I'm attracted to functional objects that interact with light in the everyday world. I frequently use cast-glass, aluminum blinds, and polyester satin, to name a few examples. Of course, being in LA right now, has led me to think more about works by Light and Space artists.

ML Especially through your work, you've become increasingly interested in reimagining symbols of power, specifically as they are represented in modern architecture and infrastructure. Could you speak about how your interest in this subject began?

AL I found myself interested in the reflections that we see in buildings that are being developed all around the city. They are visually dynamic, yes, but I thought they had this ominous feeling too — an uncontrollable outcome of continuous development. The reflections, which partly result from buildings mirroring one another, seem like disruptions on the glass, and those disruptions felt potentially powerful. To take some agency in designing that kaleidoscopic experience felt like something I could do. In this political moment, psychedelia and its aesthetics, feel tangible again.

ML Yes, in your new body of quilts, you're translating the visual effect of these reflections, or "illusionistic disruptions," a term I remember you using once. The high sheen and billowing of the quilt's polyester satin fabric closely approximates the glare and movement of light across glass-paneled skyscrapers.

Your quilts naturally bring to mind the materials and techniques of craft. Quilt-making in art belongs to a larger tradition in which artists, historically and today, have taken up this mode of working to challenge gender roles in both the art world and society. Do you think of your work in this context?

AL When I decided I was interested in making work that took on the subject of these monolithic glass building reflections I thought that the quilt, as a format, was a really interesting counterpart. Large-scale development projects by default have gendered associations in form and in history, which reflect outward. I think of these glass facades as cold and evasive. You can't see inside. Quilts on the other hand are intimate domestic objects, historically handmade by women. They're also deeply personal objects. At the same time, the quilts share a geometric kinship with buildings. I thought there was something interesting about the difference in the scale of production between the two.

Untitled, 2018, Nori, laminate

Sunset Gates, 2018, satin, batting

The Sky and the Gig, 2019, satin, batting

Acting Blanks (detail), 2017, glass, wood, formica, polyethylene, powder-coated steel, mylar

ML Speaking of scale, I'm interested to hear more about the installation of your large quilts. In your solo show at Magenta Plains in 2018, you installed some of these works in a site-specific manner. Can you talk about your interest in architecture and your process for thinking about how these works relate to exhibition space?

AL I think a lot of artists feel that they're fighting against the odds to stay in places like New York with all the massive structural initiatives and urban development going on today. In my exhibition The Golden Door at Magenta Plains I was interested in exploring the encroachment of these buildings. I made use of the verticality of the gallery's two-story space by installing two large-scale quilts on the same wall in both spaces. These two quilts function as compositional extensions of one another.

ML You often choose evocative titles for your works. A couple examples that come to mind are *Hot Desking* and *Amatony of a Continental Shelf*. Titles like these allude to something both poetic and practical. How do you determine your titles and what role do they play in your work?

Titles can be additive to the work, directing an interpretation but not describing one precisely. In both of those cases I'm referring to the forms of the sculptures. *Hot Desking* is actually modeled after a kind of multi-tiered desk that is approachable on all sides — the idea being that you can have a shared desk space and people swap in and out. Not sure that's worked out so well, practically speaking, but it created a design trend.

ML You have close ties to different circles of artists, some of which include fellow RISD and Bard graduates, along with those who you've known for a long time in New York. Considering how challenging it can be to find commercial exhibition opportunities, it seems important and maybe even necessary today for artists to anchor themselves to a community. I've noticed that younger artists are increasingly engaged with alternative ways of showing their work, and through these kinds of efforts, new artist communities are formed. This leads us back to the topic of artist communities and artist-run spaces like ZAK's. How important is your artist community to your practice?

AL I'm very lucky to be surrounded by interesting people who really care about art and about each other. I'm happiest when I'm alone in my studio with enough time to explore what I'm doing. So, for me, it's about the push and pull of having community but also being able to step away when needed. I think that artist communities, generally speaking, can provide opportunities for artists to reflect on their shared impulses. When talking to my peers, I find that we're often discussing why certain works feel relevant and what relates to a contemporary moment. It feels important to experience that together and investigate it further. I'm especially grateful to have connected with a diverse set of artists as well as other sculptors. When I was younger, many of my artist friends had project spaces in New York. For example, I showed work at Violet's Cafe, which was run by Violet Dennison, Graham Hamilton, and Scott Keightley. This was a great way to collaborate with peers and it led to really experimental outcomes. I think it's harder to do that now in New York because of the price of spaces and these shows are perhaps less visible than before. I think artist-run spaces are vital to artist communities and I hope there continues to be a place for it.

Melinda Lang is a curatorial assistant at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

All images courtesy of Soft Opening, Magenta Plains, Night Gallery and Ribordy Thetaz.

Tessera, 2017, nori, laminate, powder-coated steel, formica

SAD BILDUNG

Boys In Juvy Discussing Imagist Poetry

E You previously spoke about the need for "cheap overheads" and growing up working class — and I think across your work the means of production for the artist are made conspicuous characters produce art but are simultaneously juggling multiple jobs or roles or emotional entanglements alongside artistic production. The art school in your story takes on the "prestigious art school workplace/maintenance training model" which would perhaps be more apt for today's students who won't, as many of them may dream, be adopted by patrons upon graduation. Is this you foregrounding your personal means of production, the precarities that have inflected the work we're consuming, and more generally portraying the means of production for the average contemporary artist?

JG I think there's a sort of absurdity to the writing of materials and art products, or lack thereof, in my work, specifically in *Instruction* and a story called *Persistence in Practice* that I wrote for LARB, that maybe seeks to both highlight and poke fun at the absurdity of some aspect of the art-making endeavour. I mean I think about [Paul] McCarthy's *The Painter*. A lot it's both so funny and so good — but the exaggerated use of materials and artistic intention on the part of the painter is just perfect. While I'm engaged with visual art, seek it out, I'm also interested in this maybe specifically American idea that art products — the work produced by a person — is seen as some type of social currency for the person making it; that often fame or recognition, or else just visibility, something by which to define oneself where one cannot in any other way, is sought through these mediums more than the exploration of ideas through those mediums. In these characters, there is some genuine desire to make things, to be a person that makes things, but there's also this desire to somehow be defined by those things- for someone to look at these things and tell these figures who they are through those products (or again, lack thereof). Going back to this idea of fame, in our contemporary moment — it's a potent incentive for people to want to make things purely for recognition of self, to be considered something, someone, and I think that's funny. It's sad, and funny.

E Yes, but I don't think you ever cynically chastise the desire to make art or, indeed, its potential for pompousness.

JG Thanks — I do not feel cynical at all about the desire to make art. And the fame thing I don't see as a personal flaw, I just think it's ubiquitous in the larger world, people are exposed to so much through tv, through imagery, that it's inescapable.

E Yes, the pressure to see it as a personal flaw is maybe a way of occluding that fantasies of fame are all that a lot of people are offered.

JG Exactly. Pasolini's "dazed victim[s] of obsessive hopes".[4]

[4] Pier Paolo Pasolini in 'Roman Poems' (2001), p.17