

UNSTRUCTURED

Opinions and Observations



5 QUESTIONS

Janet Echelman

Suspended 365 feet above the Rose F. Kennedy Greenway, Brookline-based sculptor Janet Echelman's *As If It Were Already Here* shimmies over a space where six lanes of highway once bifurcated the waterfront neighborhood. Indeed, its billowy colored bands pay homage to those pre-Big Dig ribbons of traffic, just as the sculpture's three voids nod to Boston's early history, when it was called "Trimountain" for the three hills around which the settlement was built. With its 100 miles of twine and a half-million knots, the weblike mesh is tethered between three skyscrapers along Atlantic Avenue in concert with the effects of wind and weather. Echelman's creation, which will remain up through October, is at once delicate yet resilient, a fitting manifestation of the experience of contemporary urban life.

Tell me about your favorite childhood toy or hobby.

I grew up in central Florida. I played classical piano, and Bach was my favorite. You can see that in my work—the counterpoint and structure and interplay among multiple voices, the tension and release of harmonics. In terms of play, it was my front yard; I would pick parts of bushes and flowers and make up fantasy scenarios. It was unstructured. There was no particular toy: just pieces of string, leaves, lizards, and the shrubbery. I had three older brothers whom I looked up to. I loved being their toy.

Of all the cities you've worked in, which one best celebrates public art in civic spaces and why?

People have expressed their past frustrations with public art in Boston. But the experience on the Greenway has been so rewarding, the sense of it bringing people together from different

parts of the city, surrounding areas, and visitors from other countries. What interests me is how rapidly a space can change its meaning and how the way we use it can transform. Cranes arrived at 3 a.m. for the installation, and by 11 a.m., people were lying on the grass beneath it, having lunch and conversations. This—sharing a response to wonder—feels like a turning point. It was shocking in the most wonderful way. It feels like a greater meaning to the work because we are defining what our identity as a city can be. That it has sparked a conversation, one shared among strangers, is an authentic communal experience. If we can do this, we are capable of many things we have not yet unveiled.

You've said that the way fishermen in Mahabalipuram, a village in India, bundled their nets inspired your foray into netted sculpture. Describe that moment.

I was waiting for my paints to arrive

and they never did, so I started learning to cast bronze—the village is known for bronze casting—but didn't have the ability to express the gesture I wanted at the larger scale to fill galleries. I went for a walk on the beach, saw the mounds of nets there, and it occurred to me that it was another way to create volumetric form without heavy, solid material. I made little sketches, and my bronze-casting mentor came with me to talk to the fishermen to see if they'd knot these forms I was drawing, with twine. I took my mosquito net from where I was living and went to a tailor; we joined the mosquito netting with the hand-knotted fishing net and created a self-portrait—my first sculpture—called "Wide Hips." We lifted it onto poles on the beach, and I discovered that the wind gave it a breath of life. The scale of the work transforms the way we see air currents. Think of a small flag chopping in the wind versus a large, billowing sail.

From conception to installation, *As If It Were Already Here* is quite a feat. Any surprises or delights along the way?

How different it appears in changing weather and light. In the rain, it almost disappears, like a ghost; in sunlight, it's about the way the colors glow. The quality of light in the middle of a dense downtown is unique because the highway created a volume of air that allows for sunlight the way few cities have. But the nighttime illumination—pulsing slowly from vibrant oranges and pinks to muted blues—is when it comes alive as an illuminated beacon. Still, that dance with sunlight is extraordinary, and it's my favorite daylight piece of any sculpture I've created. Another delight is the dialogue with traffic and pedestrians, and what people are saying to me, that they walk to see the sculpture every day, that it makes them feel safer, which is not something I expected and makes me wonder: What is it that creates a sense of safety and comfort? When I lie down on the grass and look up, it's as if the sky is breathing.

What inspires you today?

During my childhood, I was inspired by playing with a piece of string and its transformation into a cat's cradle. My upcoming commission on the Sunset Strip in West Hollywood is based on a childhood dream catcher. These days I'm mesmerized by the fluid dynamics I observe in water and in air—and the transformative potential of humble materials and methods—as I braid fiber into twine, knot twine into mesh, splice ropes into architecture, and become a part of our city's urban fabric.

Interviewed by **FIONA LUIS**.

OPPOSITE

Photo: Peter Vanderwarker

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SEEN

Saint Christopher

Boston

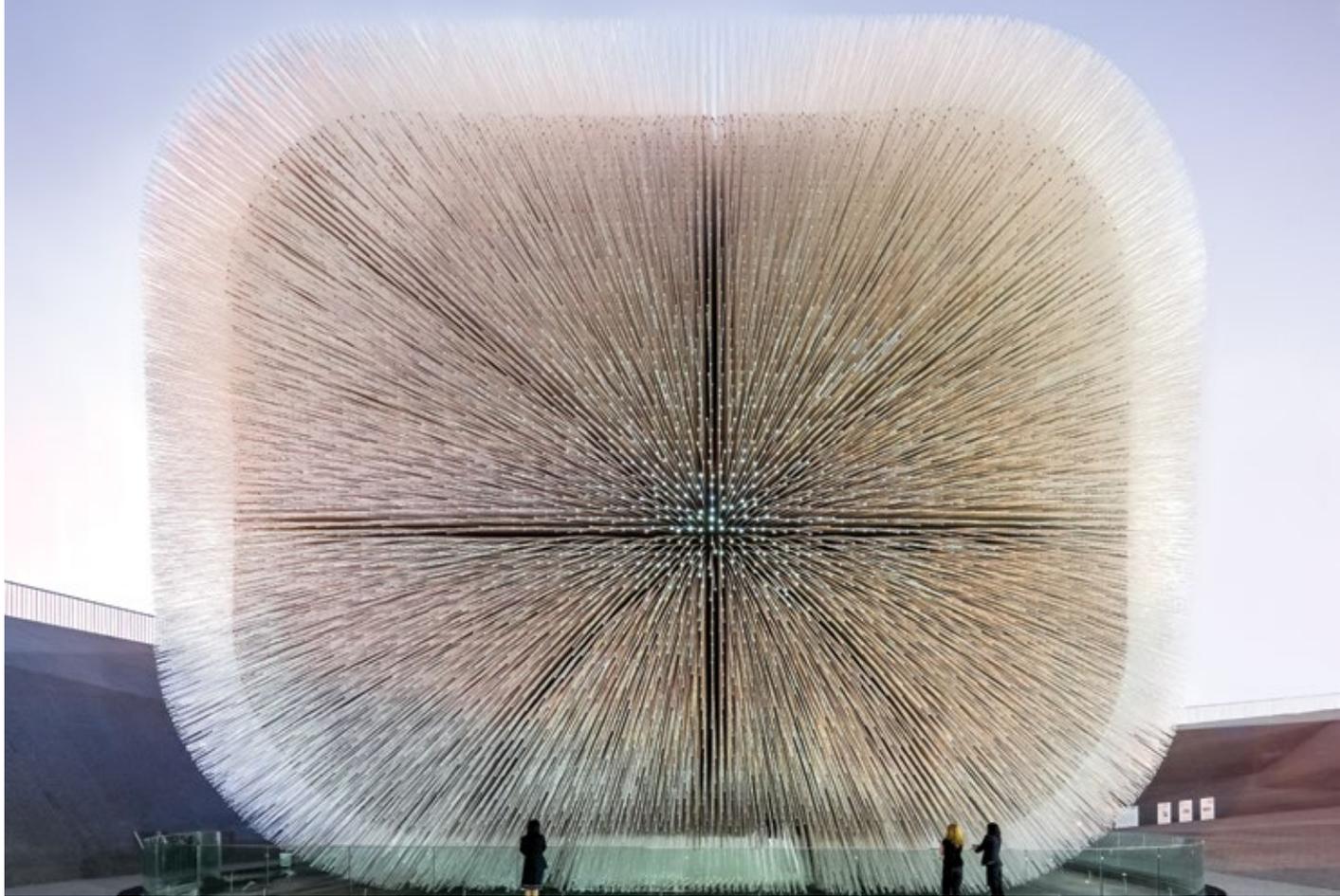
The photographs in my series called *Reconciliation* explore confessionals, the small rooms in Catholic churches where people confess their sins. Using available light and long exposures, I photograph from the perspective of the penitent, looking for what the spaces might reveal about faith and forgiveness.

I almost didn't photograph Saint Christopher because it was snowing. When I arrived, I was self-conscious about leaving snowy boot prints on the carpet. The confessionals were simple, with warm light, and the curtains were easy to pull back. I was surprised to find a missalette in one of the confessionals. I wondered about who had brought it and why it had remained. The green cover felt like a reward for trudging through the snow.

Alone in the church, I worked slowly, trying different camera tilts in order to capture the dust on the book's cover. The church quickly grew dark; outside, it was still snowing. Before leaving, I took a copy of the parish bulletin; it was almost time for evening mass, and I wondered how many people would make it.

S. BILLIE MANDLE is an assistant professor of photography at Hampshire College and lives in Massachusetts.





Provocations: The Architecture and Design of Heatherwick Studio

Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York City

Through January 3, 2016

To fully appreciate *Provocations*, one might first take a trip a few miles south to the Morgan Library. Here, another exhibition celebrates the 150th anniversary of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The shifting scales and fantastical juxtapositions from the mind of author Lewis Carroll, aka Charles Dodgson, seem to be embedded in Thomas Heatherwick's own design DNA, as do Dodgson's interest in puzzles and scientific experimentation. The title *Provocations* refers to the challenging questions Heatherwick develops for every project, both as a guidepost and a kind of riddle to be answered.

The London-based studio's work would look just as intriguing through a microscope as it might through a telescope, and even a small sampling of Heatherwick's material choices can tell a big story. The prize-winning UK Pavilion for the 2010 Shanghai Expo, *Seed Cathedral*, is represented with a handful of the structure's 60,000 anemone-like quills. Look closely, and each of these fiber-optic rods has a different kind of seed suspended in its tip. And the architectural models on display aren't just the typical 3-D sketches in foam. These studies are meticulously detailed and occasionally even come to life—a model for a Rolling Bridge transforms with the turn of a crank, the two sides curling up like twin caterpillars. (Heatherwick's original 2004 *Rolling Bridge* near Paddington Station in London was one of his first projects to receive international notice.)

The show, which originated at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas and then traveled to UCLA's Hammer Museum, was tailored to fit the Cooper-Hewitt's third-floor gallery by a Heatherwick team. The most exciting aspect of the exhibition and, for that matter, of Heatherwick's 20-year-old practice, is the trajectories of long-term thinking that are laid visible across projects of all scales. The undulating topographic staircase for the Longchamp boutique in New York echoes the more diminutive design of the stairway in a reimagined double-decker bus (set to hit London's streets next year). The idea for 240 individual copper cups that composed the 2012 Olympic cauldron resurfaces in the concrete underpinnings of the proposed Pier 55 in Manhattan, a design for man-made landscape that evokes a futuristic Ridley Scott set.

Simultaneously cinematic and tactile, *Provocations* offers visitors a rare gift: a sense of wonder.

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ABOVE

The UK Pavilion for the 2010 Shanghai Expo. Photo: Iwan Baan

Architectural Allusions

deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts
Through May 1, 2016

Approaching the museum entrance, Monika Sosnowska's *Tower*, more than 100 feet long, rests horizontally in the landscape like the carcass of a Modernist façade succumbing to structural failure. With steel pushed beyond its limits, window frames (with handles intact) and supports are twisted in a way that would make any architect cringe. Just across the road sits the more conspicuous tower of Oscar Tuazon's *Partners*, where pristine reinforced concrete looks like it is either supporting or reflecting the sugar maple it is attached to. Its form, so direct, forces the question of how—and whether—the natural and built world should coexist.

Each of the seven sculptures in this exhibition of recent commissions, permanent collection work, and long-term loans contains architectural elements in representation, materiality, or tone. And

each clearly addresses modern fabrication and the effect of its aesthetic. While Esther Kläs' *Ferma (5)* and Sol LeWitt's *Tower (DC)* both use composition and granite as the basis of their works, Kläs explores the texture of fabrication and cutting of the heavy stone, whereas LeWitt uses traditional masonry methods to express a formal equation. Notions of tension are explored through Kenneth Snelson's *Wiggins Fork*, which appears as a perfectly frozen balance of metal and cables, and the newly commissioned *Beacon* by Boston-based sculptor Stephanie Cardon, which one should walk through to glimpse the water of Flint's Pond below.

Although the exhibition could benefit from literature or wayfinding that guides the visitor through curatorial connections, the overall effect is a strong collection

of works that challenges notions of scale, media, and constructability. The day I visited, Dan Graham's *Crazy Spheroid: Two Entrances*—the most architectural and interactive of the group—seemed to delight visitors; their reflections were grafted with the view of the landscape beyond. Like many of the works in *Architectural Allusions*, the visitor is part of a moment in time when artists are exploring the concept of building things in our modern world and questioning the materials we use in support of that goal.

EMILY GRANDSTAFF-RICE AIA is an associate at Cambridge Seven Associates and a past president of the Boston Society of Architects.

BELOW

Crazy Spheroid: Two Entrances (2009), by Dan Graham. Two-way mirror glass, stainless steel. Photo: deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum



MATTER OF COURSE

Contingencies of Design

Northeastern University

How do you teach design? Good question!

Here is how professor Ivan Rupnik teaches an introductory course to architecture majors in Northeastern University's undergraduate program. "We use residential scale to teach architectural space," Rupnik explained to me over coffee before I visited two review sessions of "Contingencies of Design," the second half of Northeastern's introductory requirement. "We teach free plan versus *raumplan*, and at the end we throw in some contingencies—say, halve the plot size or increase the lot grade—to see how the students react."

I saw nine students each design a 2,500-square-foot house on a quarter-acre lot in a hypothetical residential development. The lots were unevenly configured, and the students were encouraged to work with the landscape contours rather than alter them.

John Davis, a doctoral candidate at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, oversaw their studio work. Classes met in Northeastern's—shall we call them—*sui generis* architectural classrooms, built into the Ruggles T station. Every 10 minutes or so, the building shook like a leaf as a subway train passed by—but none of the students' houses buckled, I can attest. As for structural engineering all around!

The initial designs were, no pun intended, all over the lot. One student created a four-story vertical box. Another designed "two sheds kissing," as one of the reviewers called it.

Jacqueline Diaz glossed Palladio's famous Villa Rotunda design. "It's bold of you to attack the Villa Rotunda," was Davis' careful reaction. Reviewer Marilyn Moedinger, founder of Runcible Studios, made an observation that applied to many of the models: "You need a more sophisticated understanding of symmetry. Symmetry doesn't have to mean equal, it can also mean balance."

The unexpected contingency for this class was that the client suddenly insisted that two homes be built on the lot, one for a small family, the other for a single working professional. So when I attended the final review for the eight-week class, a great deal had happened. Some of the students had clearly "hit Control-C," as reviewer Jenny French, a partner (with her sister) at French 2Design, said. Faced with a tight deadline, a few students copied their initial designs and jammed them close together to fit on the lot.

Davis put the instinct in context. "You didn't need a totally new concept for the second house," he said. "A lot of what architects do is variations on a theme. You're not reinventing the wheel every time you build a house."

First-year student Joshua Soto received some of the most detailed and positive feedback for a set of structures he built on a hilltop, the highest point of the class's hypothetical neighborhood. Before the assignment mandated a second house,



Soto had built four freestanding towers grouped around an outdoor dining and social space. Moving among the bedrooms and living room meant going outside.

It occurred to me that he might live in Southern California or Hawaii, where outdoor spaces can meld nicely with the "built environment." Soto does hail from the South—the southern portion of Norfolk County, Massachusetts, where outdoor living is possible only half the year, at most.

At the second review, his hilltop plan got rave reviews. "The bulldozers have been out!" Moedinger exclaimed, noting that Soto had done a lot more than just replicate his original idea. Two families were living in seven different buildings, with the homes separated by a change of elevation inside a central structure. From below, the project still looked like a hilltop fort or redoubt. "The outer perimeter of the buildings are like a bear cage," is how Soto described his revised neighborhood of two.

"What you've done looks like a hill town in Italy or Spain," Davis said. Moedinger offered some pointed criticism: "One of your bedrooms is really just a shipping container with a skylight over the bed. You walk up the stairway, and there's a toilet stuck on the wall." Then she trained her fire on one of Soto's outbuildings: "This is more like an artillery emplacement, not a bedroom—but I like it!"

Wait, they're not finished.

Moedinger, who taught at the University of Virginia (UVA), compared Soto's layout to Thomas Jefferson's famous campus plan, which slopes gently downhill from the famous Rotunda. "You and Thomas Jefferson are in the same boat," Davis remarked. Given that Jefferson was in his mid-70s when he designed UVA and Soto is 20, not a bad boat at all.

ALEX BEAM writes a column for *The Boston Globe* and is working on a book about Vladimir Nabokov. "Matter of course" visits exceptional architecture classes at New England schools.

ABOVE
A view of Joshua Soto's model. Photo: Joshua Soto

Ken Smith in Conversation with Charles Waldheim

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

June 11, 2015

Since 1053 the Amida Buddha serenely looks out over a segment of the Uji River in Japan. Fifty-two bodhisattvas accompany the Buddha, floating at varying heights around the enclosure of the Byodoin Temple. Ken Smith, the landscape architect who created *Fenway Deity*, cites this icon of Japanese architecture and its sacred inhabitants as the inspiration for his summer installation on the façade of the Gardner Museum.

In his recent talk, Smith allied his travels to see the gardens, palaces, and temples of the world with Mrs. Gardner's mission to collect art and bring it home to her museum overlooking the Emerald Necklace's Muddy River. From the Gardner's eclectic mix of Eastern and Western influence, Smith found inspiration and pulled from his own interest in the objectified deity—an Eastern idea given Western form. *Fenway Deity*, a 20-foot inflated talisman slung between the twin chimneys on the museum's façade by a semi-inflated plastic chain, is the latest—and largest—in a series of “deity” works by Smith. As in its Japanese precedent, this deity also is intended to play a protective role, overseeing the environmental health and beauty of the Fenway.

In placing the deity on the façade, Smith's stated intention is to redirect attention—pulled to the rear of the building by Renzo Piano's addition and new entrance—to the front. However, the power of the Gardner never lies in the anonymous, mud-colored façades, but rather in the unexpected verticality and light of the tropical landscape that lies within its geode-like shell. “I'm a crow by nature,” Smith, a Midwesterner by birth, told Waldheim. “I'm attracted to shiny things.” The vulgarity or flashiness that Smith perceives in Buddhist temples is reassigned in the psychedelic spiral of color on the talisman, which is in keeping with the Pop-art inspiration of his oeuvre in public landscapes. Meant to evoke conversation and elicit questions, Smith's work meets its goal and temporarily allows one to read the façade as encapsulating the whole of the building—a perfectly mundane shell with a fantastically temporal, otherworldly center.



MARK KLOPFER AIA ASLA, an architect and landscape architect and principal of Klopfer Martin Design Group in Boston, is also a professor of architecture at Wentworth Institute of Technology. *Fenway Deity* will be on view through September 28.

ABOVE

Photo: George Bouret