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# *"How does one go all the way? One keeps going" A conversation with John McCracken about proximity, captivity, and horizons*

**Marianna Vecellio**

*"There is no ancient or modern, no past or future in art. A work of art is always present. The present is the future of the past, and the past of the future."*[1]
Ad Reinhardt

MARIANNA VECELLIO: Where should we start? I know that you don't like to talk about the past.

JOHN McCRACKEN: Usually I don't, but sometimes I do. Especially because the past impinges on the present and on the future, too. Because time is a kind of continuum and there is no real past, just as there is no real future, I don't mind talking about the past.

MV: How did you find out that you wanted to become an artist and that you wanted to make art?

JMC: That's kind of a big question. I was in the Navy for a while, on a Navy ship, before I discovered I wanted to become an artist.

MV: You worked as a sonar operator.

JMC: I was down in a "lower" sonar station on the ship and I just asked myself, what am I going to do? I've done this, I've done that. And I decided, I'll be an artist, I'll start to study art. I just decided to do it. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't know what I was getting into and what an artist was until I got to school at the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) and I came to understand what being an artist might be; I had a commercial sort of idea of what applied art was.

MV: In 1962, along with a larger production of modernist abstract paintings, you were realising strange combined sculptures, a sort of assemblage in the manner of Jean Tinguely, or Louise Nevelson, made with detritus you found on the beach.

JMC: When I was going to school in California, I used to go down to the beach where there was a lot of driftwood and discarded material and I used to play around with it.

MV: Was the California scene helping you to develop this knowledge that you wanted to become an artist?

[1] A. Reinhardt, *Twelve Rules for a New Academy*, in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art; a Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. by K. Stiles and P. H. Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 90.

JMC: I was affected by the California art climate, which was nurturing. It was a good place to be at that time. I thought at that time that it was going to be important to be in New York but Los Angeles presented itself and I was there. It was real good: cars, surfboarders, all that stuff and ideas…

MV: Who were the other artists working around you at that time?

JMC: Tony DeLap, Larry Bell, Joe Goode, Ed Ruscha, Robert Irwin… I'm terrible with names, a few more…

MV: Were you having conversations about art with any of them, the way New York School artists in the 1950s met in bars and clubs to exchange ideas?

JMC: To an extent, yes, I did meet other artists from time to time, but there weren't any get-togethers in bars. It was more of an abstract feeling; I felt I was conversing with New York artists as much as I was conversing with the California artists. I was using Artforum magazine and other art magazines that facilitated my seeing their work.

MV: John Coplans co-founded Artforum in 1962 in San Francisco and then he moved to New York. You frequently say that you feel closer to Minimalism than to "Finish Fetish", but you stayed in California instead of moving to New York.

JMC: At least for a while. I don't separate Minimalism from "Finish Fetish"–it's funny term, a funny phrase. These are art terms and I wasn't thinking about art terms. All I wanted to do was to reduce what I was doing, to pare it down to the essentials, which led me to finally consider *Planks* at one point. Up till then I was making slabs, blocks, and so forth, and suddenly what I made were pieces of plywood that were leaning against the wall. And I thought, oh my god, I guess that's it! I was in a reductive minimalist kind of trap: make the simplest things possible and have them be ok, have them stand, or be in the world, and converse with other artists' works and be viable. I wanted them to be as simple as possible but also beautiful, and sort of captivating…

MV: I would like to consider for a moment this idea of "captivating" and beauty. Do you think this might be what distinguishes your work from orthodox Minimalism? Minimalism seems to express the reduction of form through a more impersonal language and approach. Was this kind of sensitivity, a more perceptual approach, the intuitive process and the finish, perhaps something that Donald Judd and other Minimalists with their "specific objects" were rejecting?

JMC: The term "boring" seems to have applied to the works of those people, not that their artworks were actually boring, but maybe in emotional sense, compared to mine. Theirs were possibly more intellectual; they were based on types of ideas that maybe were a little more intellectual, or maybe not…

MV: You were maybe closer than them to Abstract Expressionists such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. Were you looking at Duchamp?

JMC: Not so much. Just to few of the Surrealists. But one of the first people that caught my eye was Barnett Newman. Before that it was Piet Mondrian; and before then I was taken by early Egyptian work, such as sculptures and temples.

MV: You once said that Jackson Pollock is a Minimalist artist because he uses only what he needs. This is again related to the idea of reduction. Is your work perhaps similarly related to this idea of Minimalism?

JMC: Pollock is very essential and emotional and complicated but, at the same time, I regard him also as a Minimalist; he uses just what he needs to use; he took only what he needed. It's kind of tricky, because in this sense every artist could be a Minimalist. Or an Abstract Expressionist. The definition kind of tends to fall apart.

MV: Going back to the beginning, after having done a large number of paintings with geometric patterns, your work from 1964 to 1967 went through a radicalization and its most critical production. Your work ranged from early pieces, such as *Slate,* 1964, a painting hanging on the wall, which incorporated a sculptural element into its two-dimensional surface, to *Dog Star*, 1964, a freestanding double-sided "painting"; from the two-colour works on plinths, exhibited at the Nicholas Wilder Gallery in Los Angeles in 1965, to the monochromatic freestanding blocks and slabs shown the same year at the Robert Elkon Gallery in New York; from architectural and symbolic pieces, such as *Yellow Pyramid* and *Blue Post and Lintel I*, both 1965, to the *Planks*, an expression of infinite reduction, exhibited at the Wilder Gallery in 1967. In a period of only three and a half years you produced some of your major works that express the transformation of the artwork from a "pictorial" object to a sculptural "device"; and consequently raised questions around the artwork as a variable and radical object whose specificity is always in a transition between different forms and states. How did all this happen?

JMC: To me, it was a kind of mystery as to what happened. I didn't plan it. The paintings were kind of organic for a while, then they became kind of harder, more definite and geometric forms, then they became very dramatic panel-like pieces with indentation, inlaid lacquer pieces, kind of physical but still flat. Then I did these slots and different depths and the work became two-sided from that; and then they became all set, which was still little bit strange to do, but it just happened, and when I looked at it and I realised that I'd done all that, I was kind of puzzled. Who did that? A kind of progression, perversion, from flat things, to geometric things, to reliefs and to physical things, two-sided things, and to more and more sculpture included from the beginning with the painting. It happened all by itself.

MV: A constant element in your creative process is your notebook in which you make daily notes on your work. Neville Wakefield, in one of your most recent interviews, said that your drawings are codes, like a Rosetta Stone. I would like to suggest another parallel, with prehistoric pictograms, like the ones found on rocks near your studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

JMC: That's a good analogy. I wonder if I did so many notes as kind of concrete visual memories of what was passing through my mind. So that I wouldn't forget, but also so that I could go back and look and decide a work, I'm going to do this, that, whatever. But also when you draw things and so on, you make them real, give them realities that they might not have otherwise, that you might throw

away and not see again. So this is why I did that. And also because I adore doing it; it's kind of fun. Make things on paper and show them forward.

MV: In the notebooks, among your references, you quote Josef Albers who during the 1930s and 1940s was teaching at Black Mountain College and whose use of colour and colour theories have affected artistic process for the next years. What is the meaning of colour for you?

JMC: I did realise that one of the things I was interested in was brightness and colour energy and so forth. I always tried to be careful not to have colour that distracted from form, but rather added to it or was part of it. Sometimes with colour in sculpture it seems that the colour has been added and I didn't want that. I wanted them to be together and I just did it.

MV: A colour that becomes the material itself… In your notebooks you also mention the quality of "beingness" of the artworks. What exactly do you mean by this?

JMC: A characteristic of real art, of a real sculpture, is to have a sense of being so that when you look at it, you confront it, you interact with it, instead of seeing a representation, or an illustration of something, you see something that has its own "thing-ness." Carl Gustav Jung, the psychoanalyst, described that characteristic or quality, which he called symbolic–things are truly symbolic. They go past being illustrated or referential. The more you think about them, the more you think them away. My works are more like people; you don't exhaust them very easily at all. They constantly have a sense of existence, of being, and a personality.

MV: In 1966, you were taking part in the seminal exhibition by Kynaston McShine at the Jewish Museum, *Primary Structures*, together with other protagonists of Minimalist art: at that time you were also involved in Jungian psychology and symbolic forms, and explorations related to the perceptual qualities of the artwork, which perhaps were another element that distanced you from orthodox Minimalism. Did you have any conversations with Judd, Carl Andre, or Dan Flavin, for example?

JMC: Not really so much. I did meet them, maybe in the early 1970s, because I went to New York and lived there for two or three years. But I didn't have much in terms of actual conversation. The conversations were more abstract. Sometimes the conversation might be such that I'd imagine a work by Judd or Flavin, or something like that, in my mind, and put it on the wall, in the same gallery and see how it stood up. I did that with a number of works. To get a perspective on the work itself.

MV: I'd like to turn to a previously discussed idea that the *Plank* belongs to two different worlds, which you frequently referred to in several interviews: you said that the *Planks* share the same physical space the viewer occupies–the real, psychological, and living world–and by touching the wall, they share visual space.

JMC: The *Plank* mixes the floor and the wall; it has angles. The relationship between the angle and the rest of the room becomes kind of strange, a little bit disturbed. This is why normally most things are kind of with the architecture. This may help think to differentiate them a little bit from the surroundings, from the rest of the room.

MV: The concept of “diagonality” of being in between states, expressed in this leaning “angled” plank form, related your work to the modernist debate that in the 1960s was bringing artists to confront with radical expressions like “softness”, for example, in the case of Robert Morris and Eva Hesse.

JMC: The “diagonality” was a puzzling aspect: the angle took me a lot of years to figure out. Maybe I could understand the *Planks* or maybe not. It was so puzzling in that respect I could not even understand it very well. I just did it.

MV: Your sculptures *Blue Post and Lintel I*, 1965, and *Yellow Pyramid*, 1965 –now I’m quoting you– “could be thought as buildings elements that have to do with the human environment... The essence of the man-made world.”

JMC: I thought they were two very basic forms. I kind of did the same thing with those two pieces. I did *Yellow Pyramid* first and then I did a bunch of drawings of another work, trying to find another work that could hold up next to the pyramid, and then finally *Blue Post and Lintel* I seemed to do it.

MV: The relationship between the titles and the forms of the works again expresses a reductive process.

JMC: Yes, the title is the simple description of the work itself. That is an arch and this is a keystone in the middle and this is a post and a lintel.

MV: You wanted to have colour express the structure of the work itself–its “beingness”–its structural and expressive qualities. Rather than decorative, it was one with the form. In 1966, in one of your first statements, you wrote: “I think of colour as being the structural material I use to build the forms I am interested in... I have found that... a certain combination of colour intensity and transparency and surface finish provides me with the expressive means I want...” What then happened when in the early 1970s you made the *Mandala* series or when, beginning in 1974, you created the multicoloured planks, with dripped and scumbled paint on the surface. Was this a different use of colour?

JMC: That’s a big question. I guess I was mixing sculpture and painting, I was thinking in terms of making sculpture out of more live painting. I don’t know if it worked–that’s why I didn’t continue forever to work like that. When you use colour with sculpture it gives you something that is immediately abstract; sculpture is made of red, it’s abstract because it’s not made of wood or stone. Colour tends to be an abstract quality. When you have a sculpture made of an abstract quality, if you think it that way, then you have something that’s really abstract.

MV: Some of the multicoloured planks had dripping interventions on the surface; others have a more geometric pattern. The *Mandala* series also expresses a relationship with folk art and Native American art. Navaho Indians used to create Mandalas for their healing properties, and Pollock’s sand interventions in his paintings were apparently related to this, too. What was your relationship with folk and Native American art?

JMC: The *Mandalas* have to do with “magnetic centers” and all that stuff. Folk art, Native American art, patterns, reduction–none of these things seem to be separated from each other to me, although in

the end sculptures came out being more pure again. I guess we could say that the painting was left aside, but also developed as a work by itself.

MV: From the mid 1970s, until your exhibition at New York's P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, in 1986–anticipated by your inclusion in the Corderie at the Venice Biennale the same year–your work apparently was not well received by critics. Were you aware of this? What was happening at this time? Why did critical attention toward your work change so much between those years?

JMC: I think that writers and critics never quite knew what they wanted to say about my work, or knew what to do about it. Maybe there was a climate that was a little bit against the kind of work I did, which was more sensual than others and did not quite fit anywhere.

MV: Your work seemed to be proceeding cyclically: from the wall and the pedestal to the floor with the sculptural pieces in the mid 1960s, and from the floor to the wall with the sculptural "horizontal" pieces in the 1990s. Despite the configurations of your work– highly finished geometric solids–this circularity suggests a transformation that makes me think of an organic process.

JMC: I kind of went back and forth. In reality, there were a number of horizontal pieces and I kept on producing them.

MV: What did going back to the wall and to the horizontal and flatness mean to you? Is it related to the idea of viewing, a kind of horizon?

JMC: Related to the horizon I guess, even though I thought the columns–like *Sagitarius*, and *Centaurus*, from 1988, and *Mandrake*, 1989–were figures, in a way, standing in the world, and I thought of these horizontal pieces as something similar but in their own way. I like to think they are flying, I don't think about them reclining.

MV: During the 1990s you produced a series of works related to organic forms, such as "crystals" for example.

JMC: I believe crystals have certain active properties, perhaps including intelligence, and I did certain works as result. Crystals have been magical in the sense of exhibiting certain properties.

MV: The crystal reminds me of the polyhedron illustrated in the famous etching *Melancholia* by Albrecht Dürer The artist symbolically refers to the enigma that man through his knowledge and his wits "desires" to solve. The word polyhedron means many faces; knowledge has many faces, too. It is the representation of the supreme enigma but the knowledge is never accomplished.

JMC: That's right. I believe that mystery is always present.

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