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"Labyrinths"

PHILADELPHIA COLLEGE OF ART

Labyrinths have, throughout history, been associated with ritual murder and ritual sex. The Cretan Minotaur devoured Greek youths, Egyptian kings were often buried, and Rosamond met her death while trysting with the King of England, all these in a labyrinth. Currently we encounter such forms in amusement-park mirrored rooms and horror houses, and are aware of their use as sites for laboratory psychologists to experiment with rats. Why, then, do they interest cool, contemporary Conceptual and Minimal artists? The fact that they do, and the reasons why they do, challenge previous critical attitudes about these artists' intentions and the adequacy of past responses to their work.

The recent "Labyrinths" exhibition, organized by Wheaton College and later shown at the Philadelphia College of Art, consisted of drawings, photographs, models and paintings by Alice Aycock, Richard Fleishner, Patrick Ireland, Will Insley, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, Tony Smith, Robert Smithson, and John Willenbecher. The theme figures well into modes of new participatory sculpture. In the show, one can trace the shift made in the late '60s and early '70s, from closed sculptures with instantly grasped gestalts, which made architectural references but which were nonfunctional, to interiorized sculptures, perceived in time. These too, remained nonfunctional as quasi-architecture, but referred to. theatrical sites for viewer participation, controlled by the artist.

This shift is epitomized by two re-lated Robert Morris pieces; the implications of the first are fulfilled in the second. In 1965, Morris made a large flat ring from which light emits at the slight separation that halved the ring. In his 1974 Labyrinth in the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art a single 18-inch slit in the gray, circular 8' x 34' diameter drum allows visitors to enter the dimly lit interior and negotiate the maze inside. Perceiving the earlier piece is an instantaneous visual experience; while the Labyrinth is a temporal, tactile, visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and psychological experience. It is also a performance.

The exhibition stresses the dichotomy in recent sculpture between the diagrammatic and the experiential. This split emerged from Conceptual art's mixed-media works (maps, diagrams, photographs and drawings), documenting existing though physically distant pieces. Sculpture becomes a two-fold experience, both parts of which are essential to the viewer's complete appreciation of the work. For this, a maze is a perfect sculptural mode. A plan or overview of it communicates its gestalt but is of little use in actually experiencing the piece (unless you can memorize the turnings). Once inside, you are lost, reduced to blind hope and phenomenological data.

However, the most crucial factor behind the sudden new interest in labyrinths as sculpture is precisely the heavy connotational load they carry. Using them the artist taps directly into ancient myths and primitive archetypes to which all of us respond in some way. The artist may become a super-human shaman or priest manipulating his followers. We are squeezed through narrow corridors, made to grope and stumble in the dark, confused and lost. We become anxious, even terrified. In doing so we experience that very same fear of death which the artist creates an artwork to confront, assuage, and temporarily conquer.

Ernest Becker and other younger psychiatrists who have moved away from libido and oedipal concepts as the central psychological mechanisms have substituted the fear of death as the main controlling factor in human behavior. Becker defines heroism as flying in the face of death in order to separate oneself from the common herd, and says that “the work of art is the artist’s attempt to justify his heroism objectively, in the concrete creation. It is the testimonial to his absolute uniqueness and heroic transcendence.” But, no matter how well realized the work, the artist remains unsatisfied, perhaps in the knowledge that death hasn’t been postponed or real immortality granted. The anxiety every artist knows in creating the work of art, the fear of failure, his groping uncertainty as to the outcome, are shared with the viewer when the artwork symbolizes these fears. This happens to a high degree in labyrinths and other death-associated works of art.

The maze, as conceived and designed by most of the artists in the PCA exhibition, appears cool, dehumanized, detached. It is a perfect thing, “a product of the Gods,” through which we mortals are meant to grope and stumble. To have completed the labyrinthian course, with its waylays, is to have experienced a metaphor of life’s jeopardies. Further, it is possible to see the whole process as cathartic, directly for the visitor, and indirectly for the artist.

If there is one theme uniting all of Robert Morris’s diverse endeavors, it is his apparent obsession with death. From the inert mastaba-shaped boxes of his early “primary structure” days to the tomb furniture for giants that could burn or electrically shock the viewer in his 1973 Castelli show, death has been an important part of his content which we have been appreciating subliminally. All those gray, impassive objects made of cement, steel, felt, granite and lead chilled the viewers while, paradoxically, forcing them into active engagement. In the ’60s, we wove our measured way slowly and silently around them, avoiding their threats and imagining their use in some ritual ceremony. Now that his pieces have talked to us (or, rather, droned, lectured, and litanized) and now that he’s letting us inside them, we are able to feel their full numbing effect. But this isn’t enough for Morris.

His labyrinth corridors were only 18 inches wide—a space through which one could only squeeze. Morris once made a statement that seems to ring true for his own work as well as for others in the PCA exhibition. He wrote that “the intention is that art itself is an activity of change, of disorientation, and shift, of violent discontinuity and mutability, of the willingness for confusion in the service of discovering new perceptual modes.” If cruelty was also intended, Morris affirmed it openly at least once by picturing himself as a helmeted, greased, chain-wielding S-M type.

Alice Aycock, one of the six artists in the show who has actually constructed a labyrinth, is highly conscious of the associations with sex and the fear of death. She says, “I became interested in bizarre spatial experiences, those that would have a psychological edge. And a maze, of course, especially if it were elaborate, could generate real panic.” She also points out that teenagers used the wooden multi-cursal maze she built in a field in Pennsylvania “to engage in their ‘ritualized’ social activities which can parallel the snake cult rituals that may have taken place in the labyrinth at Epidaurus.” She has another perfectly horrendous idea for a three-dimensional maze, inside the unwindowed walls of a four-story concrete building in a cruciform shape. One would enter (though I must say I wouldn’t consider doing so) through a hole in the roof, climb down and maneuver a narrow crawlspace to search for an entrance to the

rooms below, and so on, until one reached the “goal”—a blind space, 6' x 56", on the ground floor. Robert Morris never devised such an obsessively claustrophobic space.

Aycock executed a piece in Far Hills, New Jersey, in which you entered concrete “burial chambers” through holes in the roof and then had to crawl around through damp, dark, narrow tunnels below ground. She is fascinated by burial mounds, shaft graves, cemeteries, stone coffins with slab covers and the weight of damp earth. She especially favors constructing sculptures about which one might say, as someone once did, that the disturbing thing about them is “not the enclosure itself, but the possibility of no exit.”

Tony Smith is equally aware of the symbolism behind labyrinths and relates them in his thinking to photographs he's seen of trench warfare and the Newark tong wars, catacombs, mines, Kafka, and subways. He sees them as analogous to a breakdown in intellect and will. However, he characteristically creates unitary sculptures instead. The one real maze he did in a Finch College exhibition only had four rectilinear units in the room. They were threatening because they filled so much space with black massiveness. One couldn't get lost in it except, as the artist did, by losing oneself in the proportions and mathematical relationships in the piece, which he said made it a “labyrinth of the mind.” He doesn't make the shift to shamanism.

The trench warfare image relates to Dennis Oppenheim's thinking on the subject too, though the maze he executed out of hay bales on a Wisconsin farm was at least as humorous as it was manipulative. Oppenheim's work is often tinged with something sinister, but, strangely, this doesn't happen in the context of a labyrinth. Instead, it seems frivolous to stampede cows through a maze to get to some corn which they digest as they “digested” the information of the maze pathway by learning it. It has the form of a laboratory experiment, without its content.

Will Insley presents a most interesting variation on the theme. The form, and its implications, are an unlooked-for residue of his imagined architecture of the future. The frightening airlessness and funereal ambience of his controlled environments closely parallels the actual effect people experience in a labyrinth. No windows, no doors, denied spaces, all underground and endless—this is a place for the nonliving. In a sense, he takes the involvement with death to its ultimate conclusion.

John Willenbecher is highly self-conscious in his employment of the labyrinth—too much so, perhaps. His drawings of them on gray, stelelike shaped canvases have a theatrical quality, as if they were all stage-props for a mysterious graveyard scene. The maze he made in the Everson Museum does look interesting as a simple “primary structure,” but, from the model, it doesn't look as if it would offer much as an experience.

Of course, labyrinths also have their happier aspects. Sod mazes have long been used for child's play and pastoral perambulation, for instance, and this is where Richard Fleishner taps into them in a nostalgic way. Patrick Ireland enjoys their illusionistic visual potential and their traditional use as puzzles to be solved. For him they fit right into the Irish intellectual pattern, from interlaced Celtic manuscript illumination to Joyce's interwoven verbiage. On this side of things labyrinthine, the form becomes symbolic of the twists and turns, false moves and brilliant right ones, the vicissitudes, in a word, of life.

—April Kingsley