

THE PARKETT SERIES WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS / DIE PARKETT-REIHE MIT GEGENWÄRTSKÜNSTLERN

# PARKETT

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# Shadow Play

TOM McDONOUGH

In June 1927 Isamu Noguchi was a young sculptor in Paris, serving as an assistant to Constantin Brancusi. He would regularly visit the annual salon where the latter's polished bronze LEDA (1926) was on display, in order to buff its surface to the smoothness of a looking glass. LEDA's reflective shell dissolved the absolute geometries of its solid form in an inexact, unstable gleam, the certain shape of the sculpture giving way to accidental, distorted patterns of light and dark reflected from the space of the room in which it was exhibited. In optics the shiny polished metal favored by Brancusi would be called a specular surface, one that tends toward a perfect, mirror-like reflection of light. Noguchi could not help but notice the absence of shadows in his daily inspection of the work, or rather, the fact that shadows were no longer projected from within the work, as the kinds of pockets of darkness normally produced across the planes of a sculpture, but instead could only be cast onto the work as reflections from the outside. And that casting was somehow cinematic, with Noguchi's movements—his transitory, mobile reflection—"recorded" upon LEDA's immaculate, polished surfaces.<sup>1)</sup>

When Noguchi returned to New York in 1929, the implications of Brancusi's polished bronze sculpture were radicalized upon meeting Buckminster Fuller in a bohemian Greenwich Village tavern whose walls had been covered with shiny aluminum paint by the utopian visionary. Noguchi would soon repeat the gesture in his own small studio, "so that one was almost blinded," he later recalled, "by the lack of shadows."<sup>2)</sup> It was there that he made his famous portrait bust, R. BUCKMINSTER FULLER (1929), plating its bronze—upon Fuller's suggestion—in the relatively inexpensive chrome that Henry Ford had begun using on the radiator grilles of his Model A cars. As Fuller explained, "sculptors, through the ages, had relied exclusively upon negative light"—that is, shadows—as a tool in the perception of three-

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JOSIAH McELHENY, *EXTENDED LANDSCAPE MODEL FOR TOTAL REFLECTIVE ABSTRACTION*, 2004, hand-blown mirrored glass objects, industrial mirror, wood, metal, 24 x 108 x 92" / *ERWEITERTES LANDSCHAFTSMODELL FÜR EINE TOTAL REFLEXIVE ABSTRAKTION*, mundgeblasene verspiegelte Glasobjekte, Industriespiegel, Holz, Metall, 61 x 274,3 x 233,7 cm.

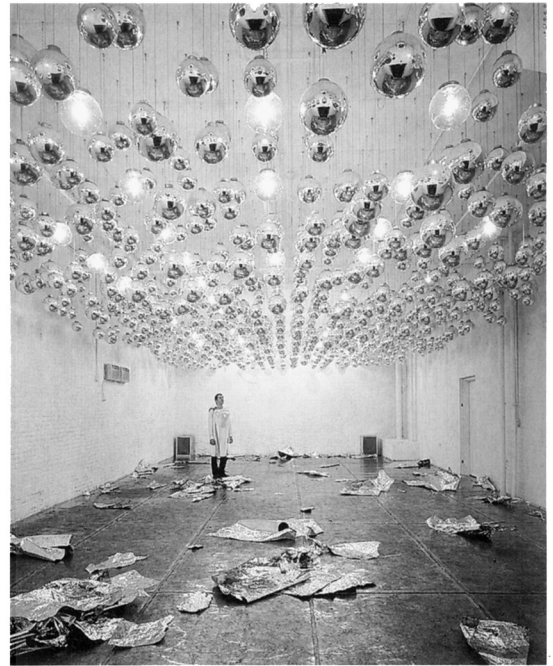
dimensional form; Noguchi's turn to positive light reflections was a shift toward a "fundamental invisibility of the surface," a sculpture that communicated only via "a succession of live reflections of images surrounding it."<sup>31</sup> A dematerialized sculpture, then, or a cinematic (from the Greek, *kinein*, "to move") one, whose effects would rely not upon form but solely upon luster, the mobile highlights on the now invisible work that move as the spectator's position shifts. Illumination would be set free to become what art historian Michael Baxandall described as "light at large, enfranchised or footloose light."<sup>32</sup>

Needless to say, Noguchi and Fuller's plans for an invisible sculpture of generalized specular reflection—their idea of a reflective form in a reflective environment—went unrealized. The very idea lay dormant, barely acknowledged, until spring 2003, when Josiah McElheny first exhibited *BUCKMINSTER FULLER'S PROPOSAL TO ISAMU NOGUCHI FOR THE NEW ABSTRACTION OF TOTAL REFLECTION* (2003), an array of mirrored reflective glass objects

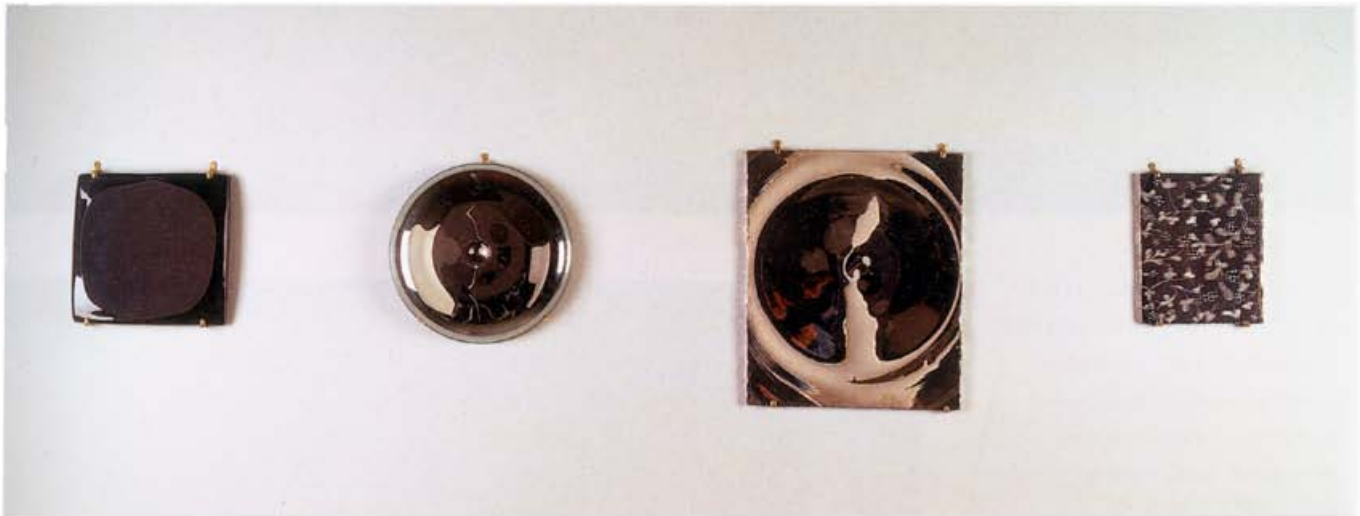
JOSIAH McELHENY, *THE METAL PARTY: RECONSTRUCTING A PARTY HELD IN DESSAU ON FEBRUARY 9, 1929* (2001), mixed media installation, costumes, music, participatory performance, dimensions variable / *DAS METALLISCHE FEST: REKONSTRUKTION EINES AM 9. FEBRUAR 1929 IN DESSAU STATTFGEFUNDENEN FESTES*, Installation, verschiedene Materialien, Kostüme, Musik, partizipatorische Performance, Masse variabel.

reminiscent of Noguchi's biomorphic forms placed atop a mirror display box. Each one presents a distorted reflection of the viewer, of the sheet of mirrored glass upon which it sits, and of the surrounding environment; meanwhile the objects themselves are doubled by reflections in the mirrored surface below them. The visual result is paradoxical: while shape seems to alter continually depending on the way light falls on the surface, the work resists optical penetration, rebuffing the gaze with its icy reflections. This late realization of the 1929 dreams of Noguchi and Fuller was instigated by curator Ingrid Schaffner, who had cited the exchange between artist and engineer in an essay commissioned by the artist for the post-exhibition book on *THE METAL PARTY* (2001–02). McElheny's performance/ installation reprised an event at the Bauhaus (also held in the fateful year of 1929). In the wake of that project, the artist was already considering "the idea that metallic-ness and reflective surfaces are physical expressions of the modern."<sup>5)</sup> Such a statement is deceptively simple: while it seems to conjure up the long appreciation of metal as a paradigmatically modern material—think of Walter Benjamin's or Sigfried Giedion's writings on construction in iron and steel, or of the metal books produced by the Italian futurist Tullio d'Albisola—McElheny emphasizes not its constructive, tectonic aspect but its surface gleam, not metal's solidity but the sparkle of "metallic-ness." For him, physically reflective surfaces rhyme with the mental act of self-examination, and indeed since *THE HISTORY OF MIRRORS* (1998) he has explored technologies of mirroring and the nature of images that are at once the same, and not the same, as us.

But the series of works inaugurated by *THE METAL PARTY* are fundamentally about something different. Indeed, what they imagined in playful form, echoing the early twentieth-century optimism of the Bauhaus itself, becomes at once seductive and nightmarish in *BUCKMINSTER FULLER'S PROPOSAL TO ISAMU NOGUCHI* and the related *EXTENDED LANDSCAPE MODEL FOR TOTAL REFLECTIVE ABSTRACTION* (2004). We might characterize these works as environments wholly given over to the invisibility of objects, objects whose immaculate surfaces seem to deny any human point of origin. "A reflective object," McElheny has observed, "one without shadow, and a liquid, fugitive surface could represent capitalism's false promise that all evidence of human labor could be erased."<sup>6)</sup> There is an evident irony here, for the artist, who spent a year in his foundry making this and related works, puts the perfection of his skills as an artisan in the service of mimicking the precision of the industrial object.



JOSIAH McELHENY, *THE HISTORY OF MIRRORS*, 1998, hand-blown, mirrored, polished, and engraved glass, hardware, dimensions variable / *DIE GESCHICHTE DER SPIEGEL*, mundgeblasenes verspiegeltes Glas, poliert und graviert, Halterungen, Masse variabel.



Indeed, in their well-nigh fetishistic flawlessness, these works appear to approach the realm of industrial branding and commodity design. Nowhere is that irony more evident than in *MODERNITY, MIRRORED AND REFLECTED INFINITELY* (2003), a wall-mounted display case whose eight mirrored, blown-glass decanters are echoed ad infinitum inside their mirrored surround. Here, reflection becomes the endless repetition of the same, in an adaptation of an aesthetic pioneered two decades earlier by Jeff Koons or Haim Steinbach. But whereas those artists had frequently played with the most demotic of commodity forms, McElheny looks instead to the pinnacles of mid-twentieth-century good taste—Italian or Swedish art glass—that he now renders as unlovely, mirrored objects. This self-contained world of luxury is accentuated by McElheny's use of a two-way mirrored front for the vitrine, which refuses our reflection on these vessels; they exist in an airless world all their own. The glass decanters perform in a miniature theater, a cinema of infinite space in which modernism's image of the good life becomes an alien realm of chilling, frozen perfection.

If one line of development from BUCKMINSTER FULLER'S PROPOSAL TO ISAMU NOGUCHI points toward the display cases of *MODERNITY, MIRRORED AND REFLECTED INFINITELY*, *MODERNITY CIRCA 1952, MIRRORED AND REFLECTED INFINITELY* (2004), or *ENDLESSLY REPEATING TWENTIETH CENTURY MODERNISM* (2007), another line leads us to those works inspired by his fascination with science and cosmology, most notably the spectacular installation *AN END TO MODERNITY* (2005), *THE LAST SCATTERING SURFACE* (2006), and *ISLAND UNIVERSE* (2008). Much has been written on his modeling of the expansion of the universe from a primordial hot, dense state, which McElheny developed in collaboration with an astronomer at Ohio State University.<sup>7)</sup> Yet what has been less remarked upon are the features it shares with the works of reflective abstraction—not merely a commonality of mirrored materials, but an underlying conceptual continuity. For all these works partake of an identical concern with homogeneity and isotropy as fundamental assumptions of modernity. We find them manifest in the infinite reflections of his vitrines, but they are also subtly encoded within the structure



JOSIAH McELHENY, *ENDLESSLY REPEATING TWENTIETH CENTURY MODERNISM*, 2007, hand-blown mirrored glass objects, transparent and low-iron industrial mirror, chrome metal, wood, lighting, 94 1/2 x 92 3/4 x 92 3/4" / *ENDLOS WIEDERHOLTER MODERNISMUS DES ZWANZIGSTEN JAHRHUNDERTS*, mundgeblasene verspiegelte Glasobjekte, transparenter und eisenarmer Industriespiegel, Chrom, Holz, Licht, 240 x 235,5 x 235,5 cm.



of AN END TO MODERNITY, as precisely the simplifications that allowed the model of the Big Bang to be formulated in the first place. At mid-century, when the phrase "Big Bang" was itself coined, both modernist design and science shared a kind of inhuman elegance that is the very basis on which the techno-scientific and the aesthetic meet. It is this, rather than the technicalities of astrophysics, which the artist has been exploring these past five years.

The Bauhaus marked one instance of such a conjunction and the meeting of Fuller and Noguchi another. The Sputnik-like chandeliers of New York's Metropolitan Opera House (designed by Hans Harald Rath of J. & L. Lobmeyr for the building's 1966 opening), McElhenny's inspiration for his recent work, are of course a third. Each, we might say, promised a world of light and order, a world of transcendence and invisibility, through the aestheticized echo of advanced technology, but those promises of modernity went unfulfilled and in fact what was delivered was an increasingly closed system of cultural administration. McElhenny



JOSIAH MCELHENY, *ENDLESSLY REPEATING, TWENTIETH CENTURY MODERNISM*, 2007, details / *ENDLOS WIEDERHOLER MODERNISMUS DES ZWANZIGSTEN JAHRHUNDERTS*, Details.  
 (Image courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

has spent recent years exploring this realm through his specular surfaces, imitating in miniature the techno-scientific utopias of the last century. His works remind us that modernity's beliefs in the power of illumination and the promise of seeing as a transcendental experience (as embodied in glass, "pure, clear and invisible, empty of symbols") were subtended by the dispelling of shadow as imperfection, unevenness, as a "hole in light."<sup>8</sup> Noguchi's intuition before Brancusi's polished bronze, amplified to an environmental scale by Fuller, was precisely of a world of the complete and utter provision of light. But what is lost through the absence of shadows? We experience shadow as uncanny, as ghost, secret, threat, but it is—or rather could be—a source of enlightenment itself. McElheny's reflective work returns us to this other of modernity and asks us, to quote Baxandall, "to think about how shadow could bear us knowledge."<sup>9</sup>

1) This discussion of Brancusi is indebted to the work of Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), pp. 85–87, 99; and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's Eight Gray: Between *Vorschein* and *Glanz*" in *Gerhard Richter: Eight Gray*, eds. Meghan Dailey, Elizabeth Franzen, and Stephen Hoban (Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, 2002), p. 20.

2) Isamu Noguchi, quoted in *Buckminster Fuller: An Autobiographical Monologue/Scenario*, ed. Robert Snyder (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 62.

3) R. Buckminster Fuller, "Foreword" in *Noguchi, A Sculptor's World* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 8.

4) Michael Baxandall, *Shadows and Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 131.

5) "Q&A with Josiah McElheny" in *Josiah McElheny: The Metal Party*, ed. Apollonia Morrill (New York: Public Art Fund and San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2002), p. 59.

6) McElheny, "Projects 84: Josiah McElheny: Artists and Models," lecture, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 12 March 2007.

7) See David Weinberg, "The Glass Universe: Where Astronomy Meets Art," *New Scientist* no. 2685 (December 7, 2008), pp. 46–47.

8) McElheny quoted in McElheny and Louise Neri, "The Glass Bead Game" in *Josiah McElheny*, ed. Maria do Céu Baptista and McElheny (Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea and Xunta de Galicia, 2002), p. 79.

9) See note 4, p. 145.

# A Conversation

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JOSIAH McELHENY & LYNNE COOKE

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LYNNE COOKE: I'd like to start this discussion by asking about a phrase I've often heard you use: "quixotic confluences"—which, I think, means things that, having come together in totally unforeseen ways, continue to resonate. You once told me that sometimes you begin a work by responding to a story or an event and that during the course of this pursuit, something else frequently comes up which overlays the piece. This was the case when your multi-part sculpture *ISLAND UNIVERSE* (2008) was installed in the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid. Siting the work in this historic building introduced a set of references to architectural traditions involving glass and its ideologies that had not been envisioned at the beginning of the project.

JOSIAH McELHENY: This takes me back to my piece *FROM AN HISTORICAL ANECDOTE ABOUT FASHION* (2000), which began with a simple discovery I made while walking through an exhibition. Reading a museum label for a 1950s or 1960s vase, I was surprised that it said the form was based on a design by the workers, who were inspired by the dresses worn by the factory owner's wife. That was so striking and I set out to make something more out of the story—something that, in a nod to realism, would remain faithful to the factory's design aesthetics as well as

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to the fashions (in general) of that era. But it became immediately apparent that I would have to choose among many strains of mid-century fashion. While researching the period I kept coming across the phrase, the "New Look," which originally comes from the American editor of *Vogue*. In a phone call (or cable) from Paris in the spring of 1947 to her Manhattan office, she said about Christian Dior's first collection: "It's the New Look." I then found out that Dior's fashion, this "New Look," resulted in actual protests throughout the United States against Dior and then, paradoxically, widespread acceptance! Finally the term became a kind of catch-all for the return to optimism after the war. This seems to me a rare historical moment when fashion had found itself at the center of the cultural dialogue. So I thought I should attempt to meld, ad hoc, all of these unrelated, somewhat accidental and circumstantial notions, with my observation about an ostensibly minor event, building these associations into something larger.

LC: Did it ever occur to you that the wall label might be false or that it might be a disingenuous fabrication? Would it have mattered if someone had been playing games with the truth?

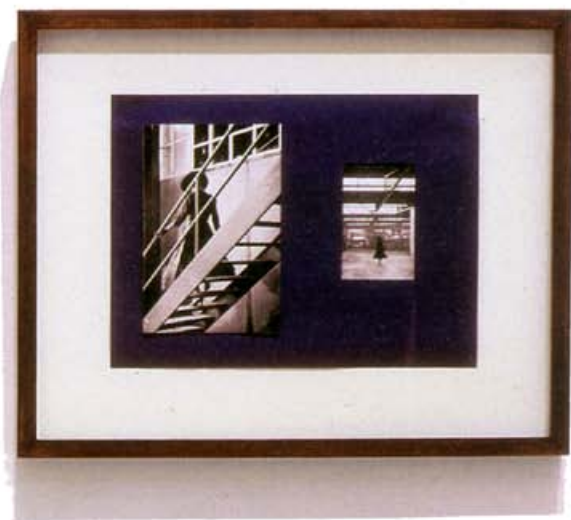
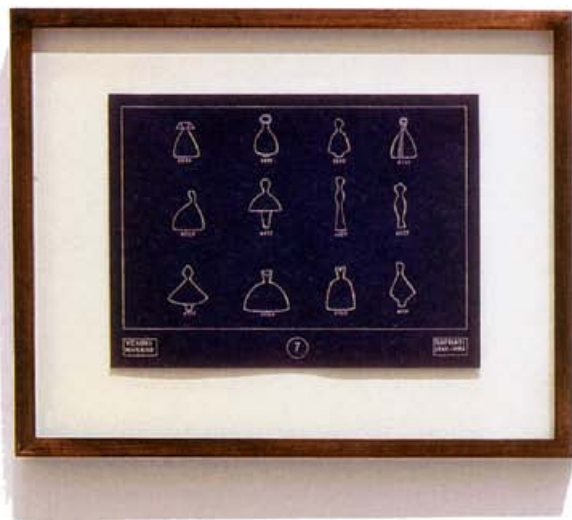
JM: Well, actually, you caught me because what the label really said—I told the story in "my" way—is that the vase was designed by the owner's wife.

LC: Oh.

JM: A friend who had worked in the factory in the fifties told me that the label was not true. I pressed



# about Overlapping Cultural Histories of Production in Art, Design and Fashion



JOSIAH McELHENY, *AN HISTORICAL ANECDOTE ABOUT FASHION*, 1999, detail, hand-blown glass objects, display case, drawing, photographs, text, dimensions variable / *EINE HISTORISCHE ANEKDOTE ÜBER DIE MODE*, Ausschnitt, mundgeblasene Glasobjekte, Vitrine, Zeichnungen, Photographien, Masse variabel.

him on it, and he told me the name of the worker who had actually designed and made the vase. It all boils down to very strict class distinctions, to the idea that it was impossible for any factory worker to design anything. So the owner's wife had to take credit for the design, for recognizing it as something good enough for the factory to produce. Even more surprisingly though, he told me that this sort of thing happened all the time; workers would go and see the

latest couture in shop windows—he mentioned that he was particularly interested in Courrèges—and then go right back to the factory and make something inspired by that at lunchtime. So you're right; it doesn't matter whether the label is true or not. What's important is that it's completely unpredictable how ideas will move through culture and end up being expressed, how ideas will twist and sometimes eventually become something else altogether.

Josiah McElheny

LC: The protests against the “New Look” in both the United States and France had to do with the vast amount of cloth it took to make Dior’s particular version of a ballooning skirt. This happened shortly after the war when rationing had only recently ended. In addition, the French government had continued to offer economic support for the couture industry (because of the jobs and manufacturing it stimulated) whereas the British and American governments did not support their fashion industries financially. So the French had an advantage in the marketplace. There was thought to be an ethical basis to the protests on both these counts. Looking at these vases, which are extraordinary luxury objects, and thinking about the factory owner’s wife’s dresses, remind us that today Dior’s look has ironically become the hall-

mark of the early post-war era. It was a look designed exclusively for the upper classes—though of course, there were replicas and knock-offs—and in that, essentially, it was about excess. Does your installation of refined glass vases pertain to this same luxury culture? Or is there a degree of ironic self-reflexivity? As we consider not only the vases but the way that you have chosen to display them, it’s hard to ignore the status of their prototypes.

JM: I think it is relevant that they are self-reflexive and perhaps ironic. I found out later that the owner’s wife’s daughter believed I had missed the central point, which was that the factory workers hated their employer’s wife. I had depicted them as lusting after her, but they were Communists and she was the owner. And so these ironies, too, become part of the piece.

*JOSIAH McELHENY, FROM AN HISTORICAL ANECDOTE ABOUT FASHION, 2000, detail, hand-blown glass objects, display case, 5 framed digital prints, dimensions variable, display case, 72 x 120 x 27", digital prints 18 x 25 1/2" each / AUS EINER HISTORISCHEN ANEKDOTE ÜBER DIE MODE, Ausschnitt, mundgeblasene Glasobjekte, Vitrine, 5 gerahmte digitale Prints, Masse variabel, Vitrine, 183 x 305 x 68,5 cm, digitale Drucke, je 45,7 x 64,7 cm.*



JOSIAH McELHENY, CHARLOTTE PERRIAND,  
CARLOS SCARPA, OTHERS (WHITE), 2000,  
hand-blown glass objects, painted wood and metal shelf,  
89 1/2 x 93 1/2 x 15" / mundgeblasene Glasobjekte,  
bemaltes Holz und Metallregal, 227,3 x 237,5 x 38 cm.



This little history says something about the amorality of ideas. Once absorbed into other fields, even ideas with an ethical basis can become disconnected from their original morality, and thereby hopefully more generative. The notion that all ideas should retain their original moral structure is, on some level, dangerous.

LC: We have been reviewing this artwork in terms of luxury artifacts that belong to a particular history of design. What happens when we flip our perspective and start to think of it as sculpture? Should we now talk about the vases as non-functional objects? Thinking of them in sculptural terms introduces notions that don't connect with the sorts of epithets we relate to luxury goods and their display. This is due to the relationship between the categories of design and fine art, and the conventional hierarchies that subtend those categories.

JM: In the past fifty years, there's been a huge increase in the number of people visiting art museums. But feeling connected to fine art is still confined to a relatively narrow band of society, whereas design—as a set of aesthetics that gets copied and repeated—influences all kinds of activities throughout society. Since the twentieth century, luxury goods are no longer the province of just the wealthy. They may be invented with the financial backing of the wealthy, but they inevitably get dispersed within society till they reflect the broad spectrum of all that is happening at that time.

LC: Within modernist design history, some of the best known early works came from the Bauhaus and similar groups who advocated a socially utopian role for design: they intended, or at least hoped, to better living standards by making works that would be available to a wide range of people. Venini glass belongs to a different history. Perhaps it depends on what kind of history one is writing, but I would not be inclined to place Venini in the same history as the Bauhaus, Charles and Ray Eames, and like-minded designers.

JM: It's not unlike the field of art in the sense that there are so many trajectories and circles of art practice.

LC: In the histories of modernist art we prioritize radicality and innovation—whereas in design, the value of an object generally relates not only to its aesthetic but to its potential to be inexpensively mass-produced. This underlies, for example, the way we look at Bauhaus objects, like Wagenfeld's glass designs. By contrast, when we look at Venini, we are confronted with an extraordinary level of craftsmanship and a realm of tremendous privilege, almost an haute couture of objects. Don't we ultimately look at these artifacts in somewhat different terms?

JM: I would argue that our apprehension of these objects is almost always factually wrong—the truth is often the flip side of what we think. Aside from Breuer's tubular metal furniture, most of what was designed at the Bauhaus was only produced in small

quantities and never achieved any kind of broad influence until much later with Herman Miller or Knoll, or maybe now, with something like Ikea. Take Josef Hoffmann, for instance, whose work was made in small workshops that were located in the same building where he was designing them. Or Charlotte Perriand and Jean Prouvé, who also produced their own designs in very small numbers. I would be curious to know how many of Le Corbusier's furniture pieces were really made when they were initially designed. In Venini's case where the production was definitely in relatively small numbers, it nonetheless involved a factory with multiple teams of five to eight people working in shifts. While there is an intense collaboration among skilled workers and a very high level of workmanship, the process still takes place inside a factory. Our typical assumptions and perceptions about these issues are quite mixed up and do not necessarily line up with the truth of how things are made, the truth of the circumstances of an object's production.

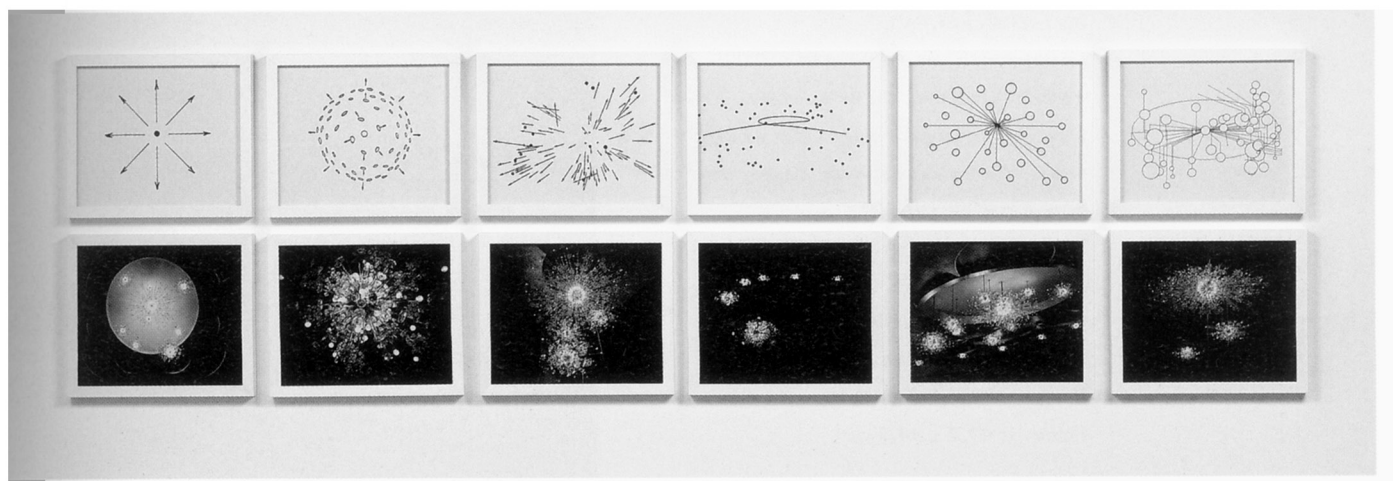
LC: Would you agree that, at the current moment, there is a greater distance than usual between artists who have access to extraordinary resources for the production of objects (not only film and video or related technology-based works employing special effects) and more modest forms of production? Is there a wider spectrum now than there was, say, in the sixties? Compare the fabrication of Judd's works in the sixties, which required a skilled set of people to produce, with an artist like Richard Tuttle, who was using the equivalent of cast-offs. And then consider the spectrum today. There seems to be an even wider division between, say, Matthew Barney and Olafur Eliasson, whose production costs are very high, and others like Francis Alÿs and Joëlle Tuerlinckx who, perhaps partly for ideological reasons, deliberately choose to limit the resources they utilize in any particular piece.

JM: We are now seeing a wider spread because society has a wider division of wealth between the working class and the upper class. But, on the other hand, it may not be so different: there were always artists who ended up gravitating towards highly sophisticated production. As Judd, for example, started to have more involved relationships with the people

making and installing his work, it appears that the work became closer to how he really intended it to be. This is partly because he began making decisions in direct collaboration with specific people who were extremely knowledgeable about craft. But in order to do this he had to essentially take over a small metal working company. Similarly, Jeff Koons claims that his work has evolved to be more the way he wants it to be, but this has required immense monetary resources. So perhaps the scale has changed, but the idea of utilizing expensive skilled fabrication techniques has not changed so much. From the opposite point of view I would argue that Matthew Barney—even though there is so much money necessary for his films—is deeply involved with his own studio in the making of his hybrid sculptural objects, both props and sculptures, and has an intensive relationship to them. The significant difference now results from true outsourcing—of artists claiming not to care how the work looks. “Here is a drawing. Come back with the finished version; however it turns out is fine.” This is a different development from the idea of building a support structure that allows one to get closer to the utopian goal of making an artwork look exactly the way it does in the imagination.

LC: Where does this situation leave painting? Whether a Susan Rothenberg or a Caravaggio, doesn't it still comprise, more or less, a piece of cloth with some colored dirt applied to it? Not only are the materials similar, but so is what it takes to acquire those materials and to work on them. Painting therefore seems to be in a totally different place from other art forms in today's spectrum.

JM: The system of painting has not changed much since the Renaissance, but at that time it was actually incredibly difficult to produce a painting—to get the pigments, the labor, the commission to, let's say, do a fresco or to pay for all the assistants it took to create a large history painting. But we have so much more wealth now and, at least in the West, we can leverage so much more labor than they could in the days of Rubens. You can get so much more “productivity” now for the same amount of money. There is an infinitely greater amount of material abundance now—paint and canvas (and time) are so much cheaper for us in Western society than they were back then. Paint-



JOSIAH McELHENY, *DRAWINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS FOR A CHANDELIER*, 1965 (2004),

*edition of 10, each consisting of 12 digital C-prints, 10 x 12" each /*

*ZEICHNUNGEN UND PHOTOGRAPHIEN FÜR EINEN LEUCHTER, 12 digitale C-Prints, je 25,4 x 30,5 cm.*

ing sits in an economic situation that has a different relationship to history. In that sense the question of how it relates to production is a very old one.

LC: If you consider a shorter time span, a modernist history, does this situation change? Beginning with Manet, or, better, with the Impressionists, painting has remained relatively unchanged in terms of scale of production: Picasso and Amy Sillman need more or less the same resources and amounts of stuff to make their works. With sculpture it may be similar. Given the fact that Rodin didn't actually carve or cast his bronzes—his stone carvings were done by specialized craftsmen, as were his bronze casts—the scale and composition of his workshop and studio were not so different from some of those we see today, whether that of Koons or your own somewhat different situation.

JM: I would return to the idea that the economic and labor issues are not always what they appear to be. I believe that these are important questions because so much of the information about production that is visible within the artwork ends up becoming part of its content. We make a lot of assumptions from that information. Take, for instance, a Luc Tuymans painting. Part of our response to it involves a consideration of its modesty—even if we are mistaken about the work's actual economic, labor, or production values.

LC: Does that mean that a certain pathos surrounds painting today?

JM: Well, yes, because a lot of these questions have to do with the idea of what we as individuals can do. Compared to other times in history, we don't do very much. We have become so specialized that, as a result, we are severely limited in terms of what any of us can do. Painting, however, still represents something that we intuitively feel can be done by the individual. And in terms of sculpture, this constant question of what can be made by an individual or small group remains paramount even as production in the twenty-first century evolves further away from people. A hundred years ago, in this very spot where we're sitting in Brooklyn, virtually every single everyday item would have been made within a two- or three-hundred mile radius, if not down the street. And that would have been true, more or less, in any other urban environment, but it's absolutely not true now.

LC: This seems compounded by the fact that, in many instances today, most of us can't tell how something has been made. Nor can we precisely identify its materials, nor can we understand the processes by which—especially with electronic goods—it functions. Perhaps that's partly why we often savor things made by hand—painting included.

# PLAY and DISPLAY

Josiah McElheny's *MODEL FOR A FILM SET (THE LIGHT SPA AT THE BOTTOM OF A MINE)* (2008) consists of an irregular curtain wall of clear hexagonal glass bricks, forming a backdrop against which stacks of colored glass cubes and hexagons rise in a vaguely architectural scene. Like all of McElheny's work, *MODEL*'s apparent simplicity opens onto complex interactions of abstraction and representation, art and design, objecthood and fiction. The "light spa" it ostensibly models is that of "The Light Club of Batavia," a "ladies' novelette" by visionary architect and writer Paul Scheerbart, which recounts a secret pact to transform an abandoned mine shaft into a fantastic setting of Tiffany glass.<sup>1)</sup> McElheny's reference to Scheerbart, also invoked in *THE ALPINE CATHEDRAL AND THE CITY-CROWN* (2007), augments his sculpture's dialectical resonances. For although Scheerbart's ideas informed the glass and steel of In-

ternational Style Modernism—inspiring the likes of Bruno Taut and Mies van der Rohe—they also envisioned an unrealized alternative of brightly-hued glass, enamel, porcelain, majolica, and ornamented concrete. "I should like to resist most vehemently the undecorated 'functional style,'" declared Scheerbart in no uncertain terms, "for it is inartistic."<sup>2)</sup>

*MODEL* features in the movie *LIGHT CLUB* (2008), a collaboration between McElheny and Jeff Preiss, wherein a continuous panning and rotating shot renders its curtain wall a vitreous waterfall as well as an analogue for the filmstrip running through the projector. In its brightness, simplicity, tactility, and miniaturization, however, McElheny's sculpture calls to mind less a movie set than a set of children's blocks, arranged into an imaginary landscape for a model train. The resemblance only enhances McElheny's Scheerbartian reference. For according to Walter Benjamin, the oddly-formed beings who populate Scheerbart's science fiction—from the Vestians of "Malvu the Helmsman" to the Pallasians of Lesábendio—represent nothing other than the children of our posthuman future, "new, lovable, and interesting

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JOSIAH McELHENY, *MODEL FOR A FILM SET (THE LIGHT SPA AT THE BOTTOM OF A MINE)*, 2008,  
*Hand-blown colored glass modules, cement, wood, 37 x 37 1/2 x 68" / MODELL FÜR EIN FILMSETTING  
(DAS LICHTBAD IN EINEM MINENSCHACHT)*, *mundgeblasene Glasmodule, Zement, Holz, 94 x 95,3 x 172,7 cm.*



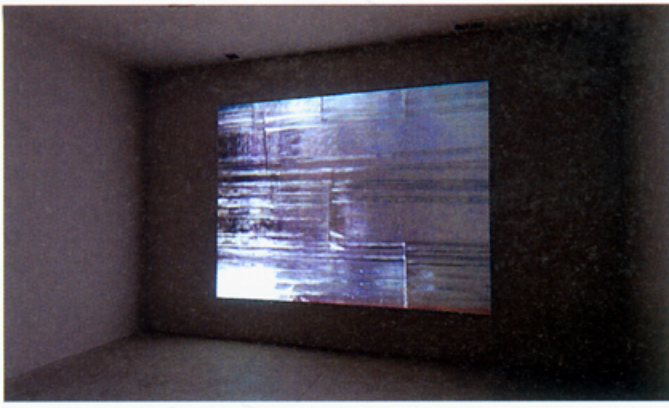
creatures” for whom “humanlikeness—a principle of humanism—is something they reject.”<sup>3)</sup>

McElheny has conjured stark and stunning visions of futuristic environments in his *LANDSCAPE MODEL FOR TOTAL REFLECTIVE ABSTRACTION I-V* (2004) and the *SCALE MODEL FOR A TOTALLY REFLECTIVE LANDSCAPE* (2007) series, dazzling topographies made entirely of mirrored glass. In their scale, horizontality, and formal vocabulary, they quote Isamu Noguchi’s playground and furniture designs. For McElheny, these lesser-valued facets of Noguchi’s work imply utilitarian and ludic interactions with quotidian objects. What he calls the “Useful Noguchi” “raises questions about the possible interactions between a work of art and the person encountering it, and... asks how that experience might end up influencing the way we relate to the ordinarily nonabstract, everyday world... [W]e are an integral part of

the picture, welcome to explore, interact, and play around.”<sup>4)</sup>

McElheny’s mirrored glass references Noguchi’s 1929 chrome-plated bust of Buckminster Fuller, made following the latter’s suggestion that a highly reflective object in a completely reflective space would eliminate shadows. In Fuller’s vision of a “modernist utopia,” all “dark space” would be eradicated, and the individual—endlessly reflected and refracted across various surfaces—would be shown in a state of constant transformation. “Wherever you look,” notes McElheny of his sculptural realizations, “you are reflected hundreds of times—conventional mirrored reflections, but also distorted, abstracted, ever-changing reflections of yourself.”<sup>5)</sup>

The dialectics of Modernism played themselves out most insistently about the transformation of the human subject. To be modern was to contemplate



the birth of a “new man”—childlike in the ability to experience the environment wrought by twentieth century technologies of speed, communication, and reproducibility free from prejudice and tradition—whereas modernism was pedagogy, intended to instill a “new vision,” the capacity to perceive one’s surroundings from novel perspectives and in the “objectivity” of pure abstraction. Capitalism, with which modernism is inextricable, shared the goal of a subject without the drag (or ballast) of history, in a state of constant transformation, albeit yoked to the arbitrary (and profitable) alterations of fashion. Scheerbart pointedly allegorized the modern condition in “Malvu the Helmsman,” where inhabitants of the asteroid Vesta not only transform continually (losing and regrowing limbs), but must be forever on the move across islands that are themselves constantly transported along swirling “electrified” seas.<sup>6)</sup> As for any modern urban dweller, such perpetual movement induces stress. Scheerbart’s main character, Malvu, helps the Vestians transcend constant activity for a life contemplating history, philosophy, and religion within the glass “lighthouses” that tower above the ocean’s surface. Out of the incessant shocks of *Erlebnis*—the “lived throughness” that Benjamin saw as characteristic of modernity—the Vestians forge a new *Erfahrung*, the holistic, organic “experience” that, in its traditional form, modernity had destroyed.

In the literature thus far devoted to McElheny, much is made of his apprenticeship to master glassblowers, whose craft is handed down orally in a tradition reaching back to the Middle Ages, a form of knowledge impossible to transmit save for years of practice. Some have been quick to laud his work

JOSIAH McELHENY and JEFF PREISS, *LIGHT CLUB*, 2008.

16 mm film transferred to video, 72 min. /

LICHTCLUB, 16-mm-Film transferiert auf Video.

as a return to tradition, mastery, craft, and beauty for their own sakes, coupling their discussions with blanket dismissals of “postmodern” irony and relativism. McElheny’s relationship to the postmodern legacy, however, proves more nuanced. His immense, hanging aluminum and glass sculptures, *AN END TO MODERNITY* (2005), *THE LAST SCATTERING SURFACE* (2006), *THE END OF THE DARK AGES* (2008), and *ISLAND UNIVERSE* (2008), model the Big Bang with scientific accuracy but derive their form from the chandeliers J. & L. Lobmeyr made in 1965 for the New York Metropolitan Opera. Like many artists of his generation, McElheny relates to such objects of mid-century design as what Benjamin called “dream images,” dialectical objects that harbor the visionary futures of past eras but that also reveal the collapse and commingling of the supposedly autonomous realms of art and industrial design.<sup>7)</sup> In addition to figuring the interpenetration of high and low (a signature postmodern insight), McElheny’s works allegorize the breakdown of Modernism’s linear notion of history (the advance of one avant-garde “-ism” after another) to create visual analogues of its fragmentation. “[T]he project was really about a change in the way of looking at the world,” he explains:

*In 1965, while Lobmeyr was trying to grapple with the confirmation of Big Bang theory, other fields of inquiry were also laying waste to the modernist view of history as a single line of progressive development. Intellectual thought in the West was beginning to splinter in a way that echoed cosmology’s concept of a decentered, non-hierarchical universe. The political ramifications of these ideologies turned into the centre of my thinking about this project.<sup>8)</sup>*

That McElheny has endorsed the more inclusive political viewpoint that such realizations entail—“an infinite number of unique, true histories of the world”—should suffice to demonstrate his distance from his more reactionary supporters.<sup>9)</sup>

If part of McElheny’s project derives from art’s passage through postmodernity, it is nonetheless true



that experience—signaled by, but not limited to, the integrally lived material knowledge of glassworking—remains one of McElheny's foremost artistic concerns. To see this as nostalgia for pre-industrial modes of production, however, is misleading. McElheny is interested in labor—human labor and the knowledge embedded in it—which persists within but is often forgotten by prevailing discussions of art after Pop and Minimalism. As McElheny has written about the context of Donald Judd's minimal sculpture, often described as exemplary of mechanical production:

*Most industry... consists of a complicated collaboration between machinery, automated or not, and people with accumulated knowledge and experience... An incredible amount of labor and care was taken to create Judd's works, from handling materials as they came into the shop to assembly, polishing, and shipping. If his works had truly been machine-made on an assembly line, they would actually be much more rustic, cheap, or tricky in how they would have had to hide the problems and flaws of production itself.*<sup>10)</sup>

By describing Judd's work as the product of fully industrialized manufacture, art historians inadvertently collaborate in the alienation they otherwise abhor, "capitalism's false promise that all evidence of human labor can be erased."<sup>11)</sup> Seen from this perspective, McElheny's combination of handcraft and Conceptualism provokes a more complex understanding of the manner in which past and future, residual and emergent, archaisms and neoformations, coexist within the contemporary socio-economic realm.

It is here that the potential affinity between McElheny's MODEL and children's toys proves more than an occasional observation. For according to Benjamin, toys instantiate an important aspect of the contemporary socio-economic dialectic.<sup>12)</sup> As made by adults for children, whether intended for progressive or regressive ends, toys impose upon their recipients a preformed imaginative content, thereby materializing ideology's reproductive force. As refunctioned by the child's imagination, however, either because of an inherent ambiguity or *détournement* through use, toys form the basis of collective mastery over the conditions of the contemporary, industrialized world: a locus, in other words, of renewed experience. Children's interactions with toys thus prefigure

the adult's relation to those technologies Benjamin presciently foresaw "culminat[ing] in... the remote-controlled aircraft which needs no human crew" and that we now recognize in the cybernetics and computerization of control societies: "The origin of the second technology lies at the point where, by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature. It lies, in other words, in play."<sup>13)</sup>

More recently, Italian philosopher Paolo Virno has emphasized the importance of Benjamin's insights into childhood.<sup>14)</sup> According to Virno, contemporary life can be understood as a struggle between, on the one hand, the enforced puerility of corporate and governmental infantilization (think only of the incredulity with which the press has greeted Barack Obama's propensity to speak to the public like adults) and, on the other, a renewed ludic experimentation he describes as "critical" childhood. The latter becomes particularly important in the aftermath of postmodernity, which saw the realm of communication so thoroughly saturated by commodification as to have eliminated any meaningful subjective distance from it.<sup>15)</sup> Like Scheerbart's Vestians, we find our "bodies and individual limbs" tightly wrapped in a "complicated pictographic script."<sup>16)</sup>

For Virno, child's play promises to dislocate preformed and manipulated environments, not merely to extract difference from repetition (for the child, the same bedtime story is forever new), but to create out of this difference an alternate "world." To seek to oppose the "objectivized codes and materialized grammars that... are enveloping us without residues, like an amniotic fluid," writes Virno, "means to reactivate childhood. Which is to say, to dissolve the viscous appearance of a 'linguistic environment,' rediscovering in language what dislocates and makes the 'world.' ... [C]hildhood lives on in the hypothetical language in which possibilities other than the present state of things come to the surface."<sup>17)</sup>

Following from his interest in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, McElheny has long understood the type of dislocating power that language shares with mirrors to produce alternative worlds (see, for instance, *FOUR MIRRORS AFTER A POEM BY JORGE LUIS BORGES* [2000]). Indeed, much of his earli-

est work—as revealed in such pieces as VERZELINI'S ACTS OF FAITH (GLASS FROM PAINTINGS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST) (1996) and AN HISTORICAL ANECDOTE ABOUT FASHION (1999), in which he shrouded his glass objects with fictional but nonetheless plausible histories—is predicated upon precisely this linguistic effect. Yet McElheny's fictions do not reside solely in the textual supplements to his glassware; they also inhere integrally within their physical design. For McElheny, design cannot be regarded solely as the capitalization of the lived environment. Rather, design objects, particularly in their manner of display, embody both ideology and experience.<sup>18)</sup> Indeed, it is for that reason that a completely designed environment, one in which all experience is predetermined, is most nefariously dystopian.<sup>19)</sup> Yet for McElheny, design and display are also the realms in which imaginative refashionings of the environment (whether democratic or despotic) meet quotidian resistance and reworking. From the simple vessels of HISTORY MODERNIZED (1998)—subtly altered to act as both mnemonic repositories of our actual past and figurations of virtual histories—to the complex cosmologies of ISLAND UNIVERSE—models of five possible cosmoses that may have appeared in the wake of the Big Bang—the significance of McElheny's work derives from the manner in which he mines history to reawaken the quest to imagine alternate futures and to contemplate other means of lived experience.

McElheny's ambition to revive and interrogate the promise of alternatives—in both utopian and dystopian guises, from individual interactions to the vastness of the cosmos—forms the most profound impulse behind his artistic practice, what he has characterized as “to describe in as clear and as extreme a way as possible how a changed world might look.”<sup>20)</sup> As such, McElheny finds himself once again allied with Scheerbart, of whose work his just-quoted words could not be a more concise or accurate description. Thus it is that we might wonder: in which glass galaxy of which of McElheny's ISLAND UNIVERSE sculptures is Malvu's Vesta to be found?

1) Paul Scheerbart, “The Light Club of Batavia: A Ladies' Nov-  
elette” in Josiah McElheny, *The Light Club of Batavia: A Project*  
(self-published, 2008), pp. 13–19.

2) Scheerbart, *Glass Architecture*, ed. Dennis Sharp, trans. James  
Palmer (New York: Praeger, 1972), p. 45.

3) Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty” in *Selected Writ-  
ings*, vol. 2: 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland  
and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999),  
p. 733. Benjamin likens Scheerbart's characters to the children  
born in Russia after the Revolution.

4) McElheny, “Useful Noguchi,” *Artforum* 43, no. 3 (November  
2004), p. 179.

5) McElheny, lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York,  
12 March 2007. On the notion of “dark space,” see Anthony  
Vidler, “Dark Space” in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the  
Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 167–175.

6) Scheerbart, “Malvu the Helmsman: A Story of Vesta” in *The  
Black Mirror and Other Stories: An Anthology of Science Fiction from  
Germany and Austria*, ed. Franz Rottensteiner (Hanover, NH:  
Wesleyan University Press, 2008), pp. 70–76.

7) See my “Future Anterior: History and Speculation in the Work  
of Angela Bulloch” in *Angela Bulloch: Prime Numbers* (Cologne:  
Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2006), pp. 31–84.

8) McElheny, in David Weinberg and McElheny, “The Develop-  
ment and Origins of Island Universe” in *A Space for Island Uni-  
verse* (Madrid: MNCARS and Turner, 2009), p. 29.

9) *Ibid.*, p. 25.

10) McElheny, “Invisible Hand,” *Artforum* 42, no. 10 (summer  
2004), p. 209. Liam Gillick makes a similar point about his own  
work: “Much of the critique of certain work is rooted in mis-  
understandings about the ‘industrial’ nature of its production.  
Most of my work is hand-made in a small workshop in Berlin by  
a small group of people. There is a difference between using  
precise forms with particular finishes and the notion of indus-  
trial production in the modern or contemporary sense” (e-mail  
between Gillick and McElheny, June 26, 2009).

11) McElheny, see note 5.

12) Benjamin's writings on toys include: “Old Toys” in *Selected  
Writings*, vol. 2: 1927–1934, pp. 98–102; “The Cultural History of  
Toys” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 113–116; and “Toys and Play”  
in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 117–121.

13) Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological  
Reproducibility: Second Version” (1936), trans. Edmund Jeph-  
cott and Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 107.

14) Paolo Virno, “Childhood and Critical Thought,” *Grey Room* 21  
(Fall 2005), pp. 7–12.

15) *Ibid.*, p. 11.

16) Scheerbart, see note 6, p. 70.

17) Virno, see note 14, pp. 11–12.

18) McElheny, see note 10, p. 210.

19) Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London:  
Verso, 2002).

20) McElheny, see note 5.

*JOSIAH McELHENY, THE ALPINE CATHEDRAL AND THE CITY-CROWN, 2008, hand-blown glass, metal, painted wood, Plexiglas, colored lighting, 14 x 8 x 9 3/4" / DIE ALPINE KATHEDRALE UND DIE STADTKRONE, mundgeblasenes Glas, bemaltes Holz, Plexiglas, farbiges Licht, 426,3 x 243,8 x 297,2 cm.*

