

MICHAEL NED HOLTE AND ALICE KÖNITZ

MICHAEL: I wanted to start by talking about your photographs that you've made of Century City, a body of work that most people haven't seen, as well as your interest in John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel. I'm curious about your interest in these kinds of architectural or urban spaces that are, for me, emblems of late capitalism. They're from a specific time period, there's a specific architectural style. Is your interest specific to Los Angeles or something else?

ALICE: I don't think it's so specific to Los Angeles. The buildings in Century City seem more like ubiquitous corporate architecture. They're interesting as sculptures, as strangely shaped objects, but also as stagelike landscapes. They seem utopian, maybe even postutopian. They present a very clear agenda about how people should walk and move around in them. It's interesting how much they are used as movie sets. There were, I think, a lot of movies about the Bonaventure Hotel.

MICHAEL: Sure, and of course *Die Hard* was filmed in the Fox Tower in Century City.

ALICE: Right, yeah, that's a brilliant movie [laughs].

MICHAEL: How do you see the architecture forcing people to move through those spaces?

ALICE: The places are set up in a very controlled way. I think Century City was the first kind of corporate city in Los Angeles. The architecture firm Welton Becket Associates was commissioned by the Fox Studio to design the master plan for it. Welton Becket's successors Wurdeman and Becket developed the idea of a total design, where everything from master plan to napkins would be designed by the same company. You notice that you're on private property as soon as you do something that's outside of the city's intentional purpose. Like, someone will come and tell you, "Don't take pictures."

MICHAEL: That sounds like it's coming from personal experience.

ALICE: Yeah, of course. I'm fascinated by the idea that it is a very artificial place in the sense that it's not grown according to people's needs. It's pretty much science fiction that you move through; someone has worked it out after their own narrative. You're moving through a set or through some sort of a painting that someone made for very specific purposes. I took these pictures of people sitting on these flower pots and smoking, and it's like you're watching a play. They behave according to specific rules.

MICHAEL: Do you think that the space is inhuman, in the sense that it's more at the service of capitalism and less at the service of the human body or the needs of human beings?

ALICE: Yeah, probably. It's made for a very specific purpose. It's certainly not the purpose of helping people out with anything. You're supposed to work or, I don't know, buy stuff or go to a movie. I spent a lot of time hanging out there with Michael Rashkow and Michael Queenland, really just kind of looking around, using the space in a slightly different way from its intended purpose. It was kind of a good way of looking at it, very distanced....My other experience with this corporate city was more along the lines of its intention. I had to see an immigration lawyer in Century City whose office was in one of those buildings that look very rational and thought-out from the outside and are rather labyrinthine once you're inside. It felt like being surrounded by an obscure social superstructure, in part because I was dealing with immigration, which felt like dealing with an obscure power that makes decisions about your life.

MICHAEL: It's hard to believe anybody lives there, but people do...in penthouses. Like the father in *Less Than Zero*.

ALICE: Yeah. I had funny experiences with some people who were part of Century City.

MICHAEL: Yeah, the community.

ALICE: I needed to find someone who could give me permission to take pictures, so I was sent to the very top floor of one of those buildings, and this very important woman in a black leather skirt and white blouse came out and said, "Not even I, with my camera, could take pictures down there." [She laughs.]

MICHAEL: I wonder if that's always been the case or if that's just...

ALICE: I think that was post 9/11. I'm very sure of that. Because I took pictures there before, and it wasn't such a big deal. Maybe they didn't exactly like it, but it wasn't a problem.

MICHAEL: I wonder if you told them that you were a location scout for a Fox movie, if they would leave you alone.

ALICE: That probably would have been okay. I could have shown my papers [laughs].

MICHAEL: Yeah, you need to have a little card.

ALICE: Right, that probably would have been fine.

MICHAEL: Bird-sitter and location scout. It would be a good business card. I feel like there's a lingering sense of utopia but also obsolescence built into the name Century City, because we know it refers to the previous century.

ALICE: Yeah, there's a whole array of things about that place that were very futuristic when it was built in the '60s and are not now. Yet they still kind of convey a futuristic image.

MICHAEL: Absolutely, Century City is still shiny. Everything is still polished. I want to move from architecture to an architecture term that is *the maquette*, which appears frequently in your work. Sometimes it seems like the sculptural object you exhibit is a full-scale maquette for a sculpture that never arrives later. I'm wondering if you're interested in a potential gap or tension between the idea of sculpture as a completed object and the actual sculpture as a provisional gesture or proposal.

ALICE: Yeah, a lot of the maquettes are proposals for something. I make small models to figure out how things are supposed to be in a certain situation and scale them up for the actual space to create a relation to the size of the specific exhibition space. But most exhibition spaces are very temporary places for the sculptures. For a short amount of time they perform a certain function in a specific space. During this time, the space turns into a different location, suggesting a situation that is removed from everyday reality, a parallel world that usually comments on the real one. So the whole thing is about proposing something that hasn't found—and probably can't ever find—its terminal place. I keep the options open by having maquettes. There could be different versions of the same thing in other places. In a way the pieces are utopian.

MICHAEL: Was your most recent show at Hudson Franklin intended as a reaction to your "Public Sculpture" show at Susanne Vielmetter (2006), which addressed these bigger corporate spaces? The show at Hudson Franklin felt much more domestic in terms of the type of objects and the scale of those objects.

ALICE: While working on the show, I kept in mind that they were going to be in a small exhibition space, and the show was based on my collage work using a "fashion/lifestyle" magazine. I like working with the situation, the architecture, and its use, in which something is exhibited.

MICHAEL: So there's an interest in site-specificity to your work, even if some of that site-specificity is pragmatic.

ALICE: Yeah. I think my work is usually very pragmatic and functional. It's kind of constantly trying to justify itself. For example, the characters in my video have to be models because I have so many costumes for them to wear...

MICHAEL: Right.

ALICE: And because I've been using these lifestyle magazines, which basically advertise a certain kind of domestic space. I've been trying to furnish a space according to the spirit of these magazines, which is somewhat removed from the original magazines because I altered them so much.

MICHAEL: Sure, but fashion magazines also have a very public distribution, too. They are almost a transitive device that allows you to go between the domestic and the public.

ALICE: Yeah. *Public* is kind of a strange idea.

MICHAEL: Well, it's on a slippery slope. There's not much of it left.

ALICE: The "Public Sculpture" show that I did wasn't really in a public space either.

MICHAEL: But there was a public component to it. There was an intervention at a donut shop miles away from the gallery.

ALICE: Yeah, but that donut shop is a private space.

MICHAEL: Okay, so I want to talk about that. I'm going to call it a "sculptural intervention" that took place at a

donut shop, California Donuts. The intervention was within the context of the “Public Sculpture” show relating to the aesthetics of Century City, yet this donut shop was decidedly not in Century City. It was in a very different part of Los Angeles. What neighborhood is that?

ALICE: I don’t know if it’s Koreatown.

MICHAEL: Seems a little north of Koreatown.

ALICE: Hollywood?

MICHAEL: Yeah, that’s kind of a threshold between Koreatown and Hollywood and Silverlake. It’s a fairly anonymous Los Angeles mini-mall.

ALICE: That was my second choice for a donut shop in the area. There was this other donut shop that I thought was formally more interesting because it was pentagonal. It had one right angle and then four smaller walls, like a cake piece. But those people didn’t agree to the event, so I had to look for another place that had a similar feel to it. I thought the one I decided on was interesting because it had an overhanging roof and it was in a similar mall. The structure looks like it was built very fast, obviously without too much planning. The sculpture I made for it takes its shapes and colors from Century City—brown and golden angular shapes. The aesthetics do convey some sort of sense of security maybe, or something about being perfect. There are no gaps anywhere in Century City, things are very hermetic.

MICHAEL: I was thinking about the kind of neighborhood where the donut shop is located and how it is a form of *bricolage*, because things happen out of necessity or contingency rather than a certain kind of overarching intention.

ALICE: Yeah, that’s a good point. That “overarching intention” is probably why Century City is very dysfunctional in many ways. It works very well in how it’s set up, and it probably generates a lot of money but it’s...

MICHAEL: In *The Savage Mind*, Levi-Strauss opposes the engineer and the *bricoleur*. Century City is a feat of engineering—meaning social engineering. It’s all about totality. It’s about “whole cloth.” On the other hand, the donut shop in this great LA neighborhood pulls together all of these things rather organically by happenstance, incrementally. It’s not some sort of totality that just drops

out of thin air. I’m interested in that opposition. And, on a smaller scale, I’m interested in how those positions might serve as models for artistic practice as well.

ALICE: There is something very desperate about the donut shop area. I did stay there the whole day and the poverty seems pretty intense.

MICHAEL: Of course. I’m singing its praises, but it obviously seems impoverished, as do most of the people who move through there. It clearly opposes Century City in terms of wealth and class, not just in terms of aesthetics.

ALICE: There was this drunk guy who was kind of noticing that my sculpture wasn’t straight [*laughs*].

MICHAEL: Didn’t a drunk driver back into your sculpture at about nine or ten in the morning?

ALICE: Yeah, something like that happened. I didn’t really see it. It might have been a drunk person. Yeah, that was pretty intense. Then there was this other guy who was trying to proselytize me.

MICHAEL: One thing that happened while I was at the donut shop was that a woman just set her coffee cup on your sculpture and readily accepted it as part of the *mise-en-scène* of the strip mall, which I thought was really kind of charming. She fully accepted this thing made out of cardboard and paper as part of the architecture.

ALICE: Yeah, that’s very nice.

MICHAEL: In that way, I feel like it was actually a very successful intervention [*laughs*].

ALICE: Yeah. I was surprised that the owner didn’t like it, because I thought it was a very friendly event. I was really into the idea that my intervention could have worked as advertisement for the donut shop. I assume they thought of my attitude as imposing—to improve their design without being asked to do so. I think there is something manic about artists’ attitudes sometimes, like a person desperately wanting to redecorate another person’s place without any consideration for this person’s interests. I was interested in...claiming someone else’s place for twenty-four hours. But I was really happy with the way my pieces blended in. That was really nice. Some people who came to see my performance didn’t see the piece. I think it blended in really well. It probably would have not blended in so well in Century City.

MICHAEL: This is exactly my interest in transposition—because that neighborhood has a *bricoleur* aesthetic in terms of the architecture, in terms of not knowing exactly what neighborhood it is, in terms of the demographic makeup of that community, and different ethnicities of Los Angeles really intermingling in that neighborhood. It could readily accept Century City aesthetics as part of the mix, but if you tried to somehow transpose the aesthetics of that neighborhood into Century City, it would immediately be rejected, because Century City does represent something that's completely whole. It has totality to it and a sense of security. There are no gaps, as you mentioned. So I think it's probably a one-way street in terms of that imaginary transposition.

ALICE: Yeah, that strip mall would be very alien in that landscape.

MICHAEL: Absolutely. Even your sculpture or the maquette for the outdoor sculpture would probably feel alien in Century City because of the...

ALICE: It would feel so lost.

MICHAEL: Right. Because the materials you're using in some ways are, even if you're using that look, it's a simulation of those materials, and not quite...

ALICE: Yeah, it's a mock up.

MICHAEL: It's thrifty or humble in terms of the materials that are being used.

ALICE: Yeah. I wonder if I could make something that would actually make sense there.

MICHAEL: Can we talk about your materials a little bit?

ALICE: I don't really have any general objections to any kind of material. I could basically use anything if I could get my hands on it. Much of the material choice is for practical reasons. I don't really think of the materials metaphorically or in terms of symbolic qualities. I like constructing things out of thin wood and cardboard because they are very immediate and versatile. I used to work a lot more with casting and plaster, and I thought that was kind of annoying because everything was so heavy and cumbersome all of the time. I needed other people to help move things around...I don't have any dogmatic opinion about any material, really. Maybe some of the surfaces and colors seem to connect to other places, situations. This dark

brown is very much like the Century City color that I kind of found fascinating there, but I've also used it before in different contexts.

MICHAEL: You've definitely used a lot of reflective surfaces and materials.

ALICE: Yeah, it's also about dark brown being a light-absorbing color, combined with reflective materials. That's definitely a basic interest.

MICHAEL: Is there a class interest in your work?

ALICE: Probably there is. It's something that I don't address explicitly, but there's probably an attitude that I can't really deny.

MICHAEL: Do you feel like the class system in Germany is significantly different than it is here, or maybe there's a different mythology here about the opportunity for being rich that becomes even more intense in Los Angeles because of Hollywood?

ALICE: Of course, yeah. It's something that I'm kind of fascinated by. I've always been kind of interested in, like, these different types of systems, the capitalist system and—I don't know what you call the other system here, the plan system, or the communist system? What do you call it—the socialist system?

MICHAEL: "Big government." That fear of "big government" is a large part of how Ronald Reagan got elected—along with his Hollywood stardom, of course.

ALICE: Yeah, it's kind of fascinating how those two systems work and how they don't work and how they each kind of have drawbacks. In Germany, which is definitely not a socialist country either, everything is very regulated and everybody gets free education. There's no question about getting a lot of money for your schooling. If your parents aren't rich, you'll get some money from the government just to live off, not to pay tuition, because you don't have to pay that anyway. Nevertheless, there is a class system in Germany. I know that somehow the children of academics go to better schools and get a better education, and on the other hand, there is something about this capitalist system where it seems like you can really make your decisions, and you can have maybe a little more freedom to decide on your job situation. It seems easier to start your own business, for example, but you might be really fucked if things don't work out how you planned them.

MICHAEL: I also wonder if we have those freedoms or if that's just the mythology that keeps people going. Class issues seemed to really bubble up in the "Public Sculpture" show, and maybe not for the first time.

ALICE: You've mentioned that you studied political theory as an undergraduate. So, do you find yourself seeking out things—art—that would refer to political theory or class issues?

MICHAEL: It's complicated, and I'm interested in that question because I tend to write most frequently about work that is considered "formal" or—I really hate this term—"abstract." I tend to think art is not always the most expedient way to enact change in politics. I tend to think art is more a reflection of the times than an instigator of change. I think you could look at the audience for art and see how small it is and realize that there aren't really that many opportunities to change the world with it. I don't think there's anything wrong with art being elite in that sense or being a very specialized field of knowledge, which it is. I don't know if that's the best way for art to...I think it can engage those issues. I think it can call attention to things. It can hold a mirror up to the present political situation. But I don't know that it can really change any of those things. I'm interested in the desire for art's ability to do that. I often think most political art is dreadful and doesn't have the other things in it that I want art to have in it. So it's difficult. It's such a complicated situation. I don't know if you've been watching the news for the last five days in your isolation, but I think the whole situation...

ALICE: No, I was cut off.

MICHAEL: You'll find out about it later, but the whole situation with Paris Hilton and whether or not she was going to be in jail is getting a lot of attention.

ALICE: Oh yeah, I heard that. I heard it in the Hammer Museum! We went to see a show. The museum guy came up to my friend, he kind of looked at me, and then he went to my friend and asked him how Paris was doing [*laughs*].

MICHAEL: I think that actually it was one of those media events that was entirely spectacular in the textbook Debordian sense of spectacle. But it also was one of the few times in recent memory where class consciousness really emerged in the mainstream media. A catastrophe like Hurricane Katrina would be the other—

it was really the tipping point where the majority of Americans stopped believing George W. Bush. I'm interested in the possibility of that moment where there could finally be class consciousness in this country. I feel like all the other political issues are subsidiary to class issues. Not that Paris Hilton is going to cause a class revolt, but one can hope.

ALICE: She is very interesting in terms of class. I've never seen *The Simple Life*, I've only heard about it—a rich kid taking stupid jobs that other people wouldn't take...

MICHAEL: Like shoveling horse shit and stuff like that.

ALICE: That's kind of interesting. It sounds perverse.

MICHAEL: Yeah, it is perverse. It looked like she was going to be released from jail early because of privilege or entitlement based on who she is. That's when people started to get upset. It's difficult to separate reality from fiction in this case because so much of her life is "make-believe," a fairy tale—even her so-called reality show. She is "pure" spectacle. I think people were legitimately getting angry about this privileged kid, and honestly I think anything that can stir up a certain amount of class consciousness or anger at the economic disparity in this country is a good thing. I think Paris Hilton does that much more effectively than a work of art could do because you're talking about influence on such a huge number of people.

ALICE: Yeah, she's amazing. I've not ever made any effort to...engage with who she is. She just came to me [*laughs*].

MICHAEL: She's unavoidable, right? Even in the sanctuary of the Hammer Museum.

ALICE: Yeah, she is amazing. I made a drawing of her before this jail stuff happened. She's everywhere. Even if you really don't care and never watch TV, it's funny.

MICHAEL: I guess there's so much talk of the art market right now, which doesn't really affect me one way or another, because writing criticism is always going to be a poor person's pursuit. But if art were to become involved in some sort of class struggle, it would have to change very radically.

ALICE: Art would have to change.

MICHAEL: Very radically.

ALICE: Yeah, how could it?

MICHAEL: I don't know. That's the question, right? It's imagining the future and all the problems that result from attempting to envision the future. I think we always want to imagine a utopia but, as you said, there are these different systems and neither one of them is perfect. Needless to say, it just seems very difficult to disrupt the present system, especially given our lack of alternatives.

ALICE: It would be really desirable if the art world would change a lot.

MICHAEL: Yeah.

ALICE: Simply for the reason that it's been the way that is for a very long time, and it's just so repetitive and boring.

MICHAEL: I want to take a much longer view of the situation and suggest that we're not just going to be in this period forever. At some point something radical will change. But I tend to think it would happen because of external forces rather than internal forces.

ALICE: Probably, yeah.

MICHAEL: But I am suspicious that we're in a deeply mannerist period right now. Of course, even to call it a mannerist period is borrowing from some other discourse, but I don't necessarily see a way out of it. I suppose in darker hours I'm also suspicious that I'm a critic of mannerism. That doesn't mean I don't like the objects I write about and think about and spend so much time looking at, because I do. It's simply difficult to see outside of our time period. I'm very suspicious...I'm always suspicious of the future. Or at least trying to have a picture of what the future is.

ALICE: I think it's probably kind of a widespread feeling, no? I've talked to a lot of people who feel that way, who are really bored with what's going on. It's kind of fun because everything is so acceptable, but it also seems too easy. It's not often when you're really struck by something where you're like, "Wow, I don't understand this."

MICHAEL: It's true. I was talking to Rich Aldrich on the phone last night, and we were talking about Michael Krebber. The fact that some of those paintings are so difficult to digest is really kind of amazing considering how deep into the discourse of painting we are at this point. For someone to make a painting that could still

be indigestible—let alone offensive or shocking—that's a real trick. That's a good trick. *[He laughs.]* But it's also hard to know how to move forward from there. ■