

## DANIEL CONGDEN and DANIEL LASKARIN

536 Howe Street  
April 18 - 27

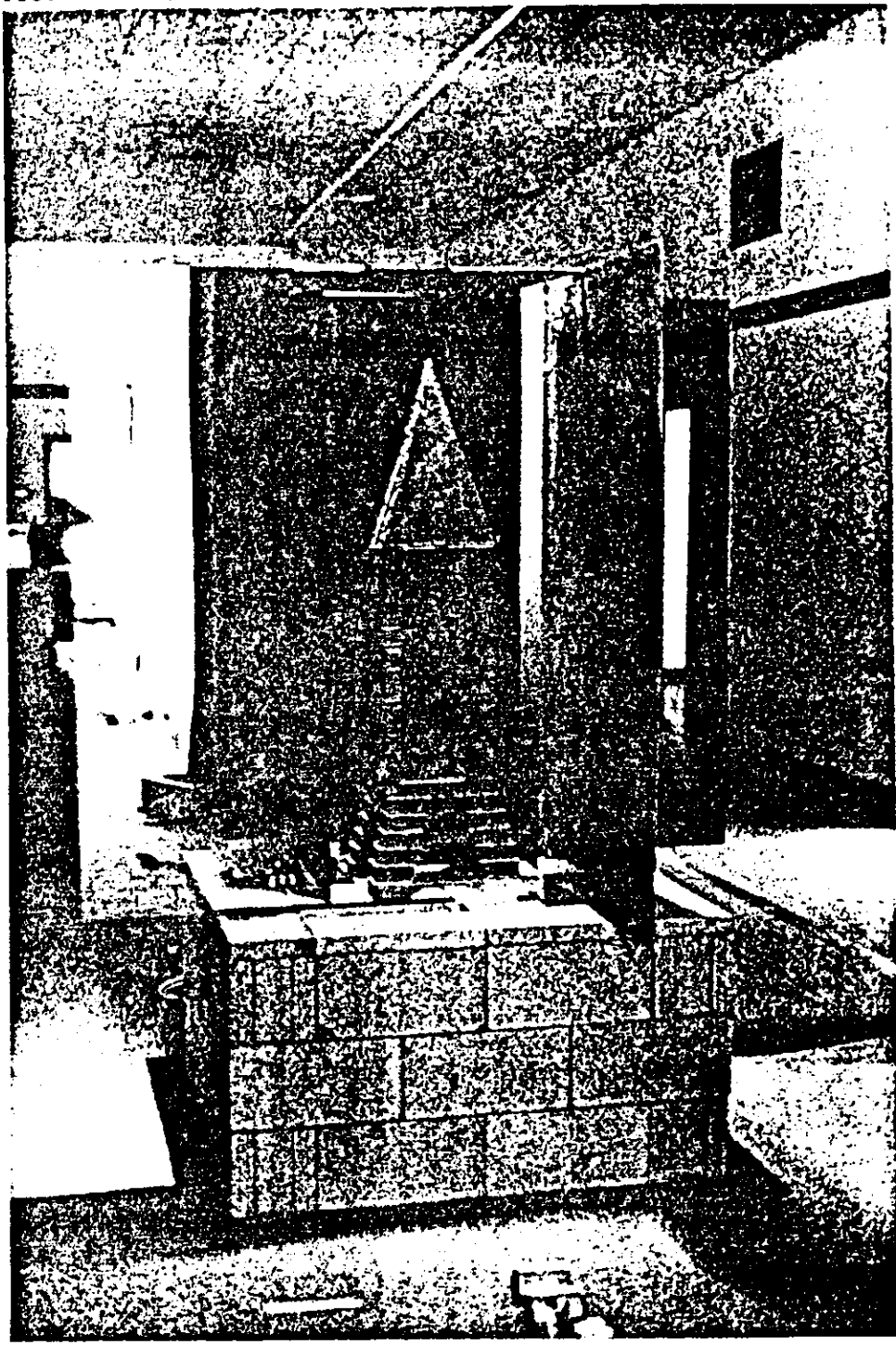
This show by two sculptors, Daniel Laskarin and Daniel Congden in the old stock exchange building on Howe Street is an attempt to escape from the isolation and separateness of the art world/gallery system and engage directly with the larger culture. It's an admirable project, for these artists are not merely looking for an audience, but are acting on their concern for the survival of the critical faculty as an active and effective element in society. Despite their intentions, however, there are problems with the work.

All three works in the show are concerned with architecture, hence the location. Congden's pieces are the simplest, and at first they seem to follow the most interesting strategy. They are also the least critical. They are paradigms of two types of urban architecture, executed in the appropriate materials: "House", made of 2x4's on a concrete slab and pedestal, and "Pavillion", of structural steel and glass, also on a concrete slab and pedestal. The bases make them truly massive, but the scale of the models is domestic and graspable.

Here is a clear analysis of the built environment, but it's not clear to what end. This mute presentation of architectural models leaves it to the viewer to establish their relationship to the context. Without the predisposition to read these pieces as critical, the off-the-street viewer might just see them as cute. But still, the strategy is appealing in its elegance and potential subversiveness - to make a representation of a structure by hand, necessarily simplifying and thereby introducing one's own interpretation, and then simply injecting it into the environment. I take this as the essence of Congden's activity - art as gesture within a specific context, a kind of silent pointing. The inexpressiveness of his pieces is their attractiveness, but in this case it also seems to be their failure.

Laskarin's piece, "Centering Structure", is ultimately more successful, by virtue of its built-in complexity. A box made of two sheets of tinted window glass and two sheets of steel is balanced on a pedestal of concrete blocks. Inside is an obelisk like structure containing a gyroscope. As one walks around the piece one is alternately face to face with blank steel walls and semi-reflective glass, through which the obelisk on its Eiffel Tower legs has a shadowy presence. Again, the materials are the very same with which the city is built, but Laskarin's "rapports" are more subtle, and even beautiful.

The sculptor calls his piece a "near monument", and in fact it is a combination of the mock heroic and a genuinely sculptural presence that balances massiveness and fragility. It is also representation on several levels. Moving from the outside in, we see first a facade like the blank and reflective walls of the downtown office towers. Inside this is a type of structure that perhaps suggests an underlying programme of monumentalization in modern architecture. Inside this is a mechanism for holding the edifice stable and upright, the brains one might say. Despite its forbidding aspect, on prolonged viewing one can feel a sense of humour operating in this



Daniel Laskarin, "Centering Structure"

piece. Laskarin gives us an image of a building and its corporate creators combined as a kind of sinister but faintly ridiculous immobile robot.

Yet this piece also speaks about deception and illusion, and therefore about our relationship to our architecture and its purposes. In the end, despite its difficulty, the essentially critical intent of the piece is more likely to communicate itself to a denizen of the downtown core who gives it some time than that of Congden's pieces.

Both in the content of their work, and its placement, Congden and Laskarin are affirming their belief that the critical intelligence should act through art, and that it has a place within society. Too reserved to force a direct confrontation, too much conditioned by

modernism to adopt a conventionalized language, these artists still hope to have an effect on the world. However alienated they may feel, and the remoteness and cerebrality of their pieces suggests that they do, they still maintain a degree of idealism. This is an attitude I share. What they seem to be working through is how involved they want to become, and this uncertainty provokes inevitable questions about the effectiveness of their method. For me it boils down to a problem with work that is better thought out than expressed.

Robert Linsley