

Confinement. Illusion. Bondage. At what point does the description of a dilemma perpetuate it. At what point, after the withered relic has gone cold in its jewelled case, do we mistake the reliquary for a template. The ancient failure to disclose becomes, in retrospect, a masterplan, the meta-grid within which *homo faber*, hopelessly addicted to production, pumps iron and makes history of testosterone abuse.

Warren Murfitt's *Speak* confines us within the limits of the stereotype, affirming them in an elegant, structural lament. The sign he uses is the ubiquitous balustrade which protects the balconies of hundreds of Vancouver Specials: the developer's cookie-cutter tilt-up dream home - every joint in it pre-approved by the city zoning and building code regulations - that has defined the built environment of exurban Vancouver and evolved into an accepted folk motif. Murfitt uses the familiar aluminium railing to form a square and sits it on top of a copper base; there is room enough for one person. The traditional alchemical sublimation from bronze to silver is echoed faintly in the contrast of copper and aluminium, but Murfitt's aluminium is alloyed with modernity. The artist perhaps had a podium in mind, where all might take their democratic turn to *Speak*. But we are left instead with a pulpit, a pulpit with no way in and no way out.

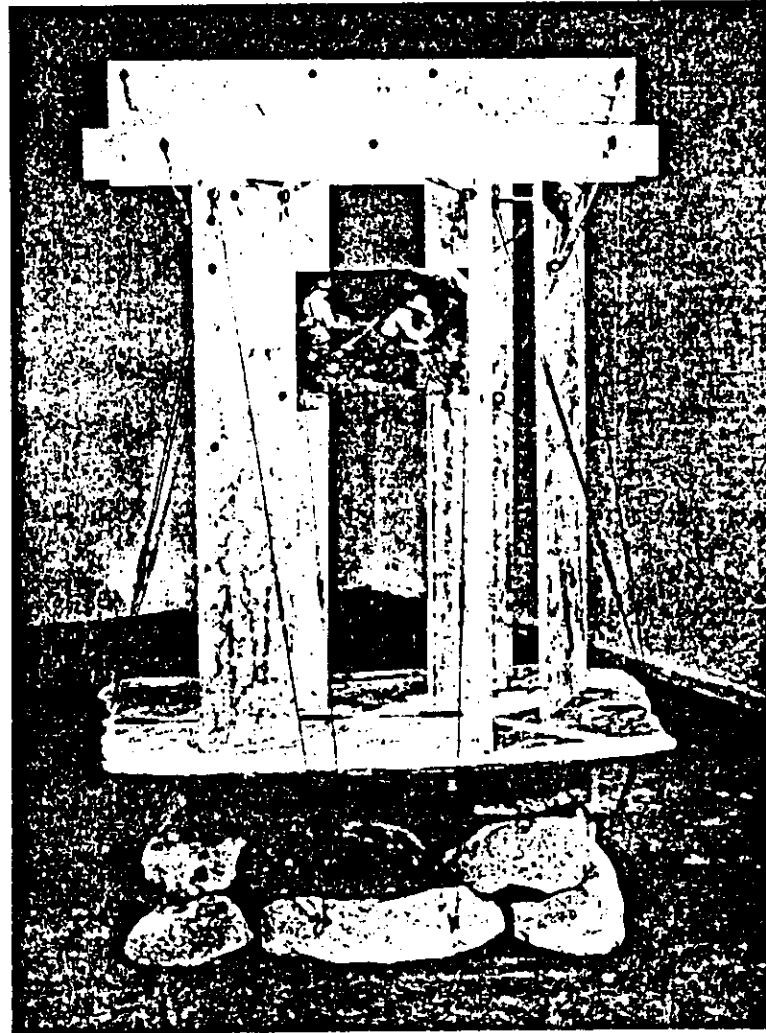
When confined, we grasp at illusions to negotiate freedom or to pass the time. Daniel Congdon has tried to help us get out of the pulpit by permitting us to look around corners. His *Untitled (PROJECT)* is a small 45° angle periscope bolted to the wall at eye level. It is vaguely reminiscent of something Michael Snow might have made, or a small Dan Graham model. Our gaze here is mediated by structure. We accept an image of reality at right angles to ourselves and follow it as it telescopes through an ever-narrowing aperture. It is miniature, precise, and rational. The sub-title, *PROJECT* remains a noun and does not struggle to become a verb: designed a bit differently, so that the focal point of the periscope extended beyond its little square scaffold, we might have been able to use it, as if a mouthpiece to a megaphone, to at least call for help. The project here, however, is to watch and endlessly analyse the mediating influence of rational structures of our own devising. For lack of something better to do we fetishize the patterns generated by structures we have set in place ourselves. Nature is confused with a kaleidoscope.

Illusion creates bondage. Trapped within Murfitt's pulpit, and only Congdon's periscope to entertain us with its memory of perspective, we trace chains of deep conditioning to a heroic but ul-

timately servile acceptance of roles. Herakles becomes Sisyphus. Daniel Laskarin's *Broken Stone* is a wondrous, fragile house of cards made from thick marble sheets, resting on a bed of granite boulders. The marble creates a post-and-lintel building that is seemingly kept in position by a web of steel cable tightened by turnbuckles. The Greeks, of course,

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had ways of keeping their much larger marble columns upright, but Laskarin's point is that this erection requires a continual turning of the buckles, the self-imposed tightening of the very bonds that confine us within the illusion of our roles.



Daniel Laskarin, *Broken Stone*. 1987, marble, granite, steel cable and hardware, half-tone print on mylar, 213 x 132 x 91 cm. Photo: Daniel Laskarin

Suspended within Laskarin's reliquary of intent and design is a fragile two-sided sign that suggests to us that knowledge of the condition is sufficient. Courbet's *The Stonebreakers* is reproduced on a sheet of mylar, and held in place with the same steel cable used for the marble sheets. The stonebreaker hacks at his rocks, the young boy behind him already bending his back and his youth to the effort. Art is the fly caught in the web of a congenial work ethic, production fueled by a sense of responsibility. A cyclical bondage, in other words, which expressively recreates the condition that Murfitt ad-

dresses from his pulpit and Congdon spies from afar. Laskarin's elegant equilibrium makes melancholy a virtue and nurses a private pathos that has public power.

The male vision of building has in turn built the male. These three sculptural works identify this convenient masquerade but do little to reveal. Within the gallery context the consequences of this arrested analysis comes across as a kind of tough, safe sadness; it is critically aware of the condition but not uninterested in self-pity. The description of the dilemma therefore becomes the dilemma itself, because it is self-sustaining in its conceit, a conceit written on our bodies and in our cities.

When the same vision is writ large and seen in the context of the street, the consequences are more telling. A recent 'accidental' work of public art in Vancouver warrants synoptic comparison: the unthinkable ugly black steel-mesh awning that skirts the Georgia Medical-Dental Building across from the Hotel Vancouver. The awning is there to protect pedestrians from the loose bricks that the owners' engineers are certain will begin to fall at some point in the future - none have fallen to date. The owners are about to tear down this mediocre but much loved (and earliest) example of Vancouver art deco and replace it with a more 'modern' building: Paul Merrick's multi-storey high-rise office tower. The right of private property in a public city is such that the owners do not feel obliged to publish the proposed design. The limits of an individual are determined only by property and power; other guises of confinement, illusion, and bondage. The visual effect of the steel skirt is to forcibly violate the façade and prevent visitors to the building from making eye contact with the three titanic stone nurses towering from the 12th floor - the only permanent human figuration on Georgia Street. These women, and the building, will go the way of all granite. The steel skirt has done its work. It has enclosed the building, confined it within its embrace and, like an industrial tourniquet, cut off all circulation. Leases have expired, final sales are being held, and windows

are not being cleaned. It has created the readily accepted illusion that the building is 'dangerous' and dead already. Thus are we bound to a progress rooted in materialist determinism: power is its own justification and history is merely the telling of it.

Warren Murfitt, Daniel Congdon, Daniel Laskarin, "New Sculptural Works", Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, January 4 to 29; The Georgia Medical-Dental Building, 925 West Georgia Street, Vancouver, 1928/9 to 1977.