

# Magic-Making in the Work of Alice Aycock

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Since the early 1970s, Alice Aycock has produced large kinetic and static sculptures that invite intellectual and physical participation. On one hand, they have been described as embodying the collective fears and anxieties of contemporary society; on the other hand, her work has also been characterized as having so-called “primitive” tribal associations. Although these two views of Aycock’s work are seemingly contradictory, they reflect the eclectic sources that inspire her. Aycock has explained that her sculptures are influenced by her studies of many disciplines and by a wide variety of personal experiences. It is for this reason that one critic was led to comment that her work reveals “mismatched ideas from philosophical, scientific, and cultural sources.”<sup>1</sup> In her sculptures Aycock explores childhood fears, the unconscious, magic, and madness. Within that context, her reading of Géza Róheim’s psychoanalytic study, *Magic and Schizophrenia*, has particularly influenced her work.

Maurice Poirier has documented Aycock’s fascination with schizophrenic hallucinations, especially as presented in Róheim’s book, *Magic and Schizophrenia*;<sup>2</sup> however, he refers only to the second section of the book, which is largely devoted to a case history of a young schizophrenic. Aycock’s work has not been discussed in relation to the first section of the book, which defines human creative activity as a magic-making process. Understanding Aycock’s interpretation and utilization of Róheim’s theory is crucial to appreciating her sculptures and the way in which she creates them. Thus, in order to more fully comprehend Róheim’s influence on her work, it is necessary to briefly survey some of her major works and then discuss Róheim’s theories regarding the magic-making process.

Aycock’s sculptures mentally, and in several cases, physically challenge the viewer. Many of her sculptures are experiential and they put the viewer (who is also a participant) into situations of danger that are both real and implied.

One of her earliest works, *Low Building with Dirt Roof (for Mary)*, 1973 (Figure 1), evokes fears of the dark, the unknown, and claustrophobia. Scaled for a child and constructed out of masonry and earth, this sculpture has the appearance of both domestic and funerary architecture, which is appropriate

considering that the work was intended to be a memorial for a young girl who had died. In essence, the sculpture is both a playhouse and a tomb.

In *Maze*, 1972 (Figure 2), which was based on a plan for an Egyptian prison,<sup>3</sup> a sense of frustration pervades the labyrinth of concentric circles—the disoriented participant seeks the center of the maze, but finds that it is not accessible. This type of frustration and disorientation is intensified and combined with fear in *Wooden Posts Surrounded by Firepits*, 1976 (Figure 3), in which fire and smoke are combined with a circular arrangement of posts that grow closer together near the center and inhibit the participant’s movement and sense of direction.

In two works, *Circular Building with Narrow Ledges for Walking*, 1976 (Figure 4), and *The Thousand and One Nights in the Mansion of Bliss*, 1983 (Figure 5), the viewer-participant is confronted with situations that threaten physical safety. The hazards present are both real and implied. For example, walking along the descending ledge inside *Circular Building* is somewhat dangerous given that the ledge is narrow and that there are no railings or handholds. The experience forces the participant to focus on his or her fear of heights, as well as the fear of the void into which he or she might fall, thus greatly compounding the sense of danger.

In *The Thousand and One Nights in the Mansion of Bliss* Aycock created an installation of several sculptures that incorporated immense whirling sheets of metal patterned after Cuisinart blades. Seeing the food processor as a metaphor for destruction, creation, and the dance of Shiva, Aycock used the blades to simultaneously provoke feelings of fear and to act as symbols for the power of natural forces.<sup>4</sup> The blades were fixed to rotate horizontally at eye-level, which must certainly have created anxiety for the viewers.

Aycock’s interest in alternate personalities has also provided her with a creative way of developing ideas. For example, in order to conceptualize a malevolent feeling that she wanted to embody in the tower-like sculpture, *The House of Stoics*, she stated, “I imagined that I was an Eastern European countess who murdered people.”<sup>5</sup> She has also commented that, as a child,

<sup>1</sup> Patricia C. Phillips, “Complex Visions,” *Art Forum* 29 (1990): 174.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Poirier, “The Ghost in the Machine,” *Art News* 85 (1986): 78-95.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Smagula, *Currents: Contemporary Directions in the Visual Arts*

(Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989), 293.

<sup>4</sup> Poirier 84.

<sup>5</sup> Poirier 83.

she escaped the pressures of reality by reading and losing herself within the character of a novel.<sup>6</sup> If we take this background into account, she found Róheim's book to be of particular interest.

*Magic and Schizophrenia*, which was first published posthumously in 1955, is based largely on interviews with a young man, referred to in the text by the initials, N.N., who suffered from severe schizophrenia. Aycock has commented that she is deeply interested in N.N.'s abilities "to defy logic and project himself into all kinds of characters and situations,"<sup>7</sup> and has stated, "Sometimes, I really wish I could hallucinate the way he does."<sup>8</sup> Aycock is interested in visionary states of madness and, through fantasy, which simulates qualities of madness, she attempts to tap into the creative unconscious.

After examining Róheim's study in total, it seems likely that Aycock is influenced not only by descriptions of N.N.'s hallucinations in the second part of the study, as Poirier has documented, but also by Róheim's definitions of the magic-making process as a creative process discussed in the first part. Within the first section of the book, Róheim explains his concept of magic within various non-Western cultures and describes the general magic-making process. Róheim believes that people in modern Western societies continue to make magic but that it is not perceived as such. He feels that "everyone practices magic" but that "the belief in our own magic has become repressed."<sup>9</sup> Consequently, Róheim presents information collected from non-Western cultures that, at the time of his fieldwork in the 1920s and 1930s, were active in magic-making.

Róheim defines magic-making as a binary process that connects mind with body, in which thought must be followed by activity. As he states, "we make yam magic, and then we cultivate a garden."<sup>10</sup> His wide definition of the magic-making process encompasses the experiences of people who live in tribal societies as well as those who live in urban environments. Among cultures that do not repress magic, individuals first "perform the incantation and then they proceed to realistic behavior."<sup>11</sup> However, in his view, "Everyone who believes he does his work well. . .practices magic,"<sup>12</sup> and he emphasizes that individuals cannot do things successfully without "believing in their ability to do them."<sup>13</sup>

In seeking to explain N.N.'s experiences and actions, Róheim defines the schizophrenic person as a failed magician. He views the schizophrenic as an individual who, knowing that he or she is unable to function within society, hallucinates in an attempt to create balance and control. Because the schizophrenic is focused predominantly on mental activity, what Róheim calls "imagination magic," the individual, in an "attempt to cope with the original danger that caused [him] to sever his ties with reality," is doomed to fail at the attempt to regain normalcy, because the magic making process is not completed.<sup>14</sup> As Róheim concludes, "only the first step is made. . .and action does not follow."<sup>15</sup>

In reviewing Róheim's study it becomes clear that Aycock may very well have incorporated his definition of the magic-making process into her method of producing sculptures. She has stated on several occasions that the evolution of her work is divided into a four-step process: (1) she fantasizes; (2) she executes detailed conceptual drawings; (3) she constructs the project and makes allowances for aesthetic and practical reasons;<sup>16</sup> and, (4) she writes about the project.

Aycock has stated that her projects are developed initially by "thinking and fantasizing, rather than sketching."<sup>17</sup> Róheim sees this preliminary thought-based stage as akin to the first step in the magic-making process because magic "is the basic element in thought" as well as "the initial phase of any activity."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Aycock explains, "I have to see a piece in my head first—it has to emerge, this image—and I don't even do little sketches."<sup>19</sup> She describes her fantasizing in a manner that is strikingly similar to the schizophrenic disjointedness of N.N.'s stories. The following passage is a typical example of one of N.N.'s descriptions as transcribed by Róheim:

There is too much speed or gravity in me. I feel as if the chair were falling over and throwing me out. It is like one of my dreams or fairy stories. It is like the time when I was crossing the field near my house, when I had the lion, and the speed took me away. I disappeared between the sun and the night, and I was not seen again for seven or eight years.<sup>20</sup>

Compare the above passage with the following passage in which

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Morgan, "Alice Aycock: A Certain Image of Something I Like Very Much," *Arts Magazine* 52 (1978): 118-119.

<sup>7</sup> Poirier 82.

<sup>8</sup> Poirier 83.

<sup>9</sup> Géza Róheim, *Magic and Schizophrenia*, ed. Warner Muensterberger (New York: International UP, 1955) 84.

<sup>10</sup> Róheim 83.

<sup>11</sup> Róheim 11.

<sup>12</sup> Róheim 84.

<sup>13</sup> Róheim 11.

<sup>14</sup> Róheim 82.

<sup>15</sup> Róheim 83.

<sup>16</sup> Morgan 118.

<sup>17</sup> Aimée Price, "A Conversation with Alice Aycock," *Architectural Digest* 40 (1983): 54.

<sup>18</sup> Róheim 83.

<sup>19</sup> Hugh M Davies, Ronald J. Ornato, *Sitings: Alice Aycock / Richard Fleischer / Mary Miss / George Trakas* (La Jolla: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986) 106.

<sup>20</sup> Róheim 157.

Aycock described her drawing process:

The last drawing I did, which didn't work out so well, though I'm going to keep it, was from looking at my palm and starting to read it. I started seeing the Pythagorean theorem and a World War I trench, and some sort of diagram of how the doges got elected in Venice, and some sort of magic sign and the *I Ching* all in my palm.<sup>21</sup>

Using this fantasy process she sometimes attempts to understand what it might be like to be another person, or in one case, an elemental force. Her fantasy of being a homicidal aristocrat, to achieve a malevolent feeling in *The House of Stoics*, has already been mentioned. She has also fantasized about elemental forces in order to create different tonalities. Before constructing *The Savage Sparkler*, 1981 (Figure 6), a kinetic and aural piece that was meant to conceptualize mounting energy, Aycock recalls, "I tried to imagine myself just as an inanimate force that was tumbling and moving, just feeling these gusts of force or energy."<sup>22</sup>

Because she is not truly schizophrenic, Aycock is able to complete the magic-making process by finishing the project. In writing about the completed sculpture she again utilizes fantasy to further define the project. Aycock has complained that she feels as if she loses control of the piece after its completion. Thus, writing about the finished sculpture helps her to release the work psychologically because the effort of fantasizing and writing often develops ideas for new sculptures.<sup>23</sup> These final acts of fantasy and writing help her to separate herself psychologically from the finished sculpture and to find a place from which to begin anew.

One reviewer of an exhibition of Aycock's work stated that "her moral and aesthetic presuppositions are closely tied to her own sense of our age as one of imbalance, anxiety and uncertainty."<sup>24</sup> As Aycock examines contemporary society, she questions herself about her own fears and anxieties and she conceptualizes them into three-dimensional form. The viewer who

elects to participate in her work is placed in a risk-taking situation because the sculptures consistently achieve her intent to visualize fear, anxiety, and imbalance. Experiencing the work is intended to give the participant control over fear by conceptualizing it. Aycock recalls, "something I had learned from stories my grandmother told me was that if you could make those awful things into a story, then you could control them."<sup>25</sup> In this manner, Aycock's sculptures are like outlines of stories in which the participant becomes the main character. Aycock has referred to structure as "a model / metaphor for the world while at the same time remaining a thing in the world."<sup>26</sup> Her sculptures seem to replicate what she has described as "the continuum from phobia to philia. . . as a movement from disorientation to orientation and back to disorientation."<sup>27</sup> Keenly aware that American society relies heavily on empirical knowledge, reason, and science in an attempt to eliminate our fear of uncertainty and the unknown, she exploits emotional responses, rather than rational ones, to mitigate fear.<sup>28</sup> Her sculptures are therapeutic not only for herself, but for the viewer who makes the decision to become a participant in the piece.

In conclusion, while it has been documented that she is influenced by Géza Róheim's transcripts of a schizophrenic's delusions, it also needs to be pointed out that she practices magic according to Róheim's definition in order to bring her projects to fruition. It is important to understand that Aycock's sculptures are more than fantastic gymnasiums and funhouse amusements, as some viewers have perceived them, because upon closer inspection, they reveal her attempt to soothe socially propagated angst. Her interest in schizophrenia and the magic-making process facilitates her attempts to plunge into the unconscious mind where anxiety and fear can be conceptualized, studied, and mitigated. Alice Aycock is a sculptor who cannot be neatly labelled and whose work merits more in-depth analysis both in terms of formal and philosophical content.

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<sup>21</sup> Davies 107.

<sup>22</sup> Poirier 83.

<sup>23</sup> Morgan 118.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Sheffield, "Alice Aycock: Mystery Under Construction," *Artforum* 16 (1977): 63.

<sup>25</sup> Poirier 80.

<sup>26</sup> Alice Aycock, Project Entitled "The Beginnings of a Complex. . ." (1976-77): Notes, Drawings, Photographs (New York: LAPP Princes Press, 1977) n.p.

<sup>27</sup> Aycock n.p.

<sup>28</sup> Sheffield 65.



Figure 1. Alice Aycock, *Low Building with Dirt Roof (for Mary)*, 1973, Gibney Farm, near New Kingston, Pennsylvania. Images appear courtesy of the John Weber Gallery.

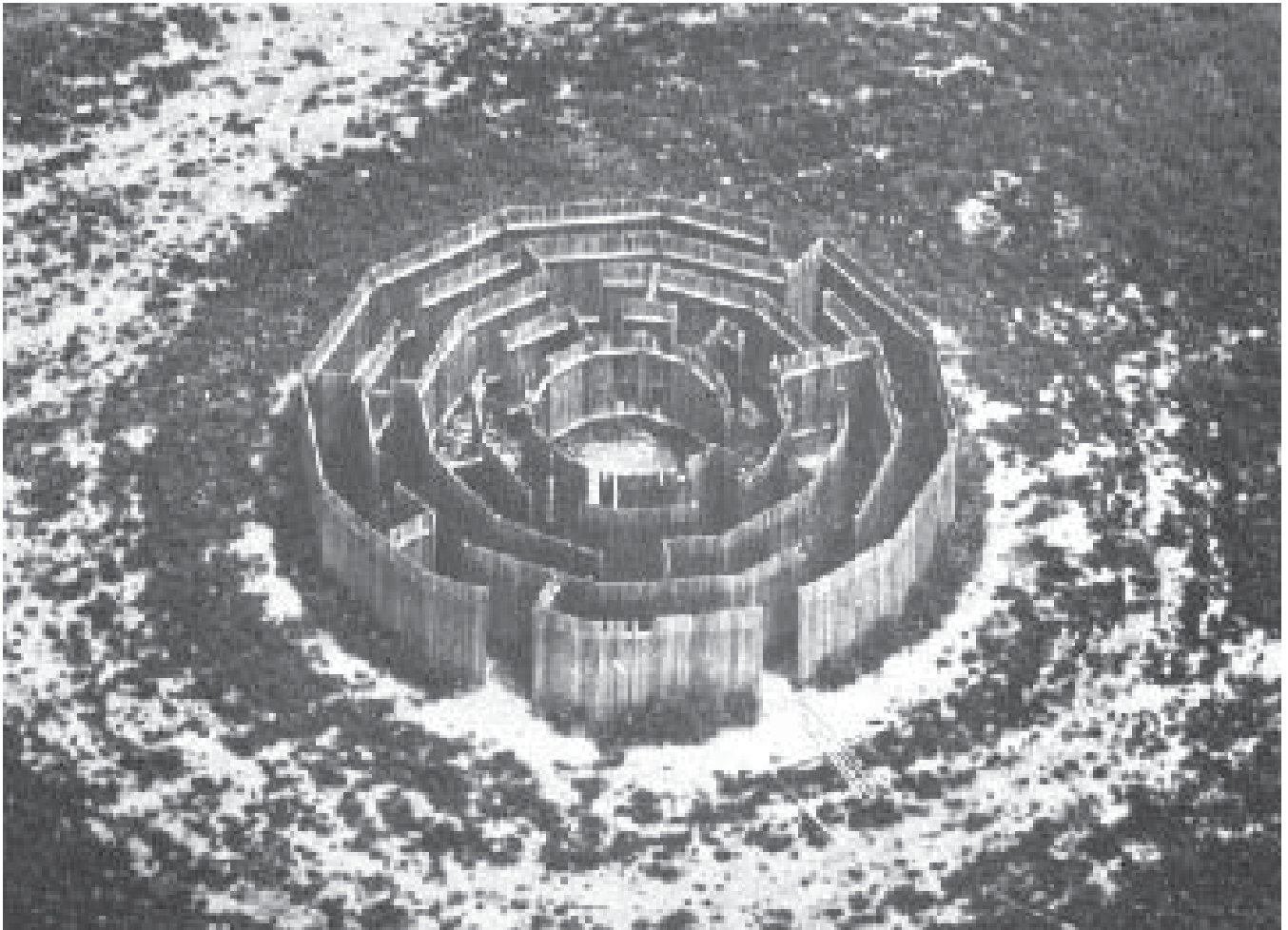


Figure 2. Alice Aycock, *Maze*, 1972, Gibney Farm, near New Kingston, Pennsylvania. Images appear courtesy of the John Weber Gallery.



Figure 3. Alice Aycock, *Wooden Posts Surrounded by Fire Pits*, 1976. Images appear courtesy of the John Weber Gallery.

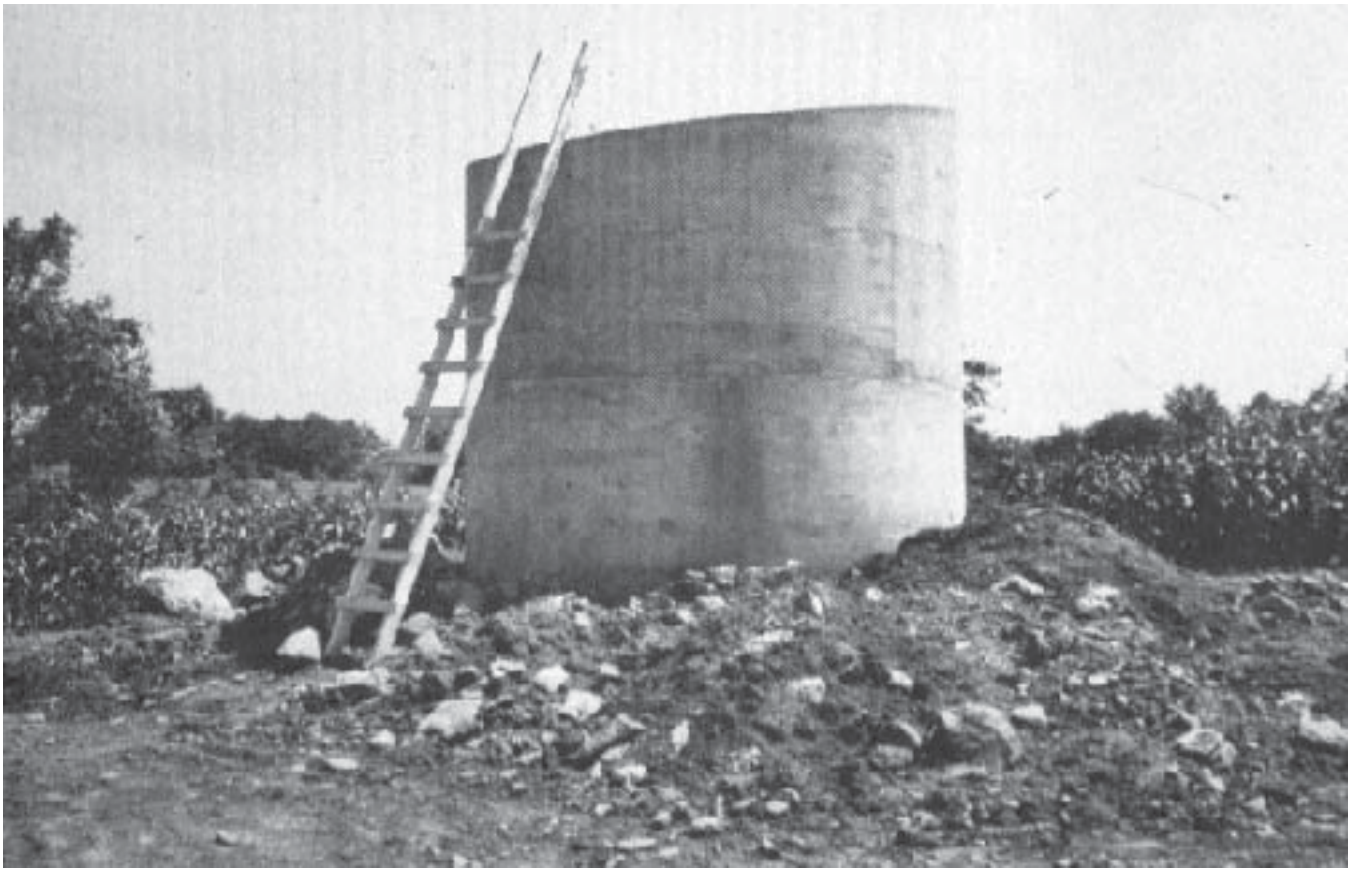


Figure 4. Alice Aycock, *Circular Building with Narrow Ledges for Walking*, reinforced concrete and wood, height 17', 1976, Silver Springs, Pennsylvania. Images appear courtesy of the John Weber Gallery.



Figure 4b. [detail] Alice Aycock, *Circular Building with Narrow Ledges for Walking*, reinforced concrete and wood, height 17', 1976, Silver Springs, Pennsylvania. Images appear courtesy of the John Weber Gallery.

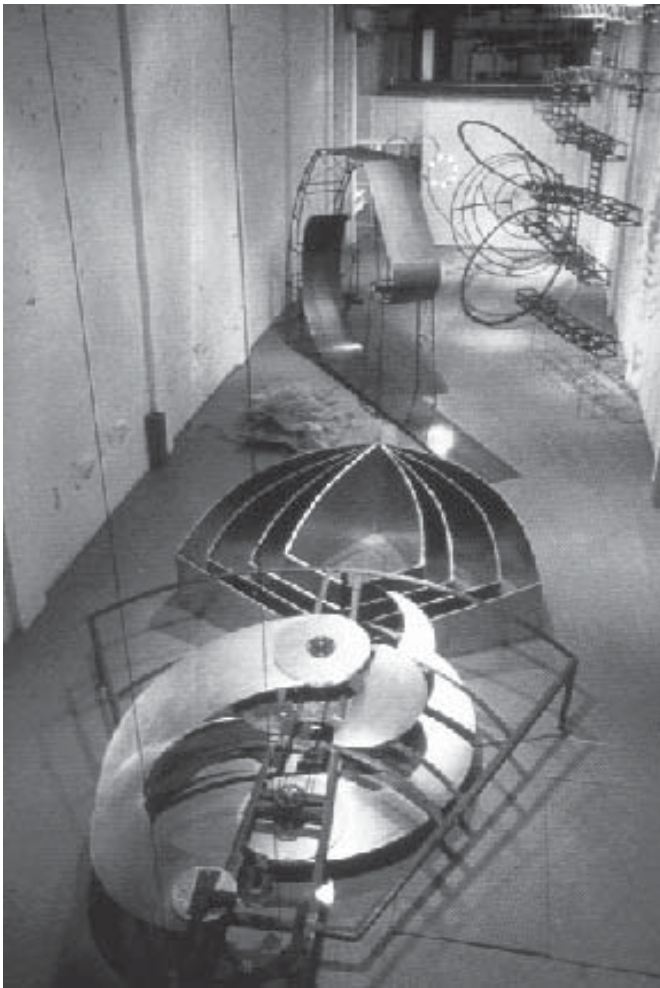


Figure 5. Alice Aycock, *The Thousand and One Nights in the Mansion of Bliss*, 1983. Images appear courtesy of the John Weber Gallery.

Figure 6. [below] Alice Aycock, *The Savage Sparkler*, 1981. Images appear courtesy of the John Weber Gallery.

