

# sculpture

June 2018  
Vol. 37 No. 5

A publication of the  
International Sculpture Center  
[www.sculpture.org](http://www.sculpture.org)



\$7.50

06



0 74820 64837 7



# Another Kind of Cell

A Conversation with  
**Kendall  
Buster**

*Model City (Constraint)* (detail), 2015–ongoing. Paper, foam core, cardstock, paint, and glue, approx. 5.5 x 15 x 23 ft.





BY AMANDA DALLA VILLA ADAMS

Kendall Buster makes large-scale sculptures out of repeated modular units. Much of her work blurs the line between architecture and sculpture by playing on the notion of scale: while some sculptures are large enough to walk into, others put viewers in a position of power by offering a birds-eye view. In “Dis-assembling Utopias,” her recent exhibition at Commune.1 in Cape Town, South Africa, Buster has returned to making smaller forms, using basic materials and simple collage and construction processes. These new works, some of which mine magazine images and archival materials and employ video, can still be read as part of her larger sculptural practice because they disrupt scale and mimic what she calls a type of “biological architecture.”

**Amanda Dalla Villa Adams:** *Much has been written about the intersection between art and science in your work. You studied microbiology and worked in clinical laboratories even after you began your studies in art. Did these experiences influence your studio practice?*

**Kendall Buster:** The things I thought about when peering into a microscope certainly informed later explorations in my work. The most obvious examples would be how biomorphic shapes appear again and again or my interest in creating forms that suggest porous membranes or skins over endoskeletons. But I think the most important connection has to do with a particular kind of preoccupation with scale and certain ways of thinking about the architectural through the biological.

**ADVA:** *What do you mean by “the architectural through the biological?” And can you say more about scale?*

**KB:** During my days in medical laboratories, I spent a great deal of time looking at single-cell organisms, my entire field of vision filled with an image not visible to the unaided eye. I had the sensation that my own body could somehow be transported through the lens and, in so doing, miraculously adjust to the scale of the world on the glass slide. At the same time, there was a word play on another kind of cell in the back of my mind, a chamber for contemplation or imprisonment. I thought about how a cell has a membrane and how this membrane encloses and marks the boundary of inside and outside, but is also a kind of threshold where interior and exterior are constantly negotiated. I see the body as something that, like architecture, only functions by way of its “negative spaces” of passageways, cavities, and openings. I am also curious about the use of the term “model” in architectural practice and scientific inquiry. In both cases, a model is not only a thing, but also a site of speculative

*Model City (Constraint)*, 2015–ongoing. Paper, foam core, cardstock, paint, and glue, approx. 5.5 x 15 x 23 ft.

MIKE HALL



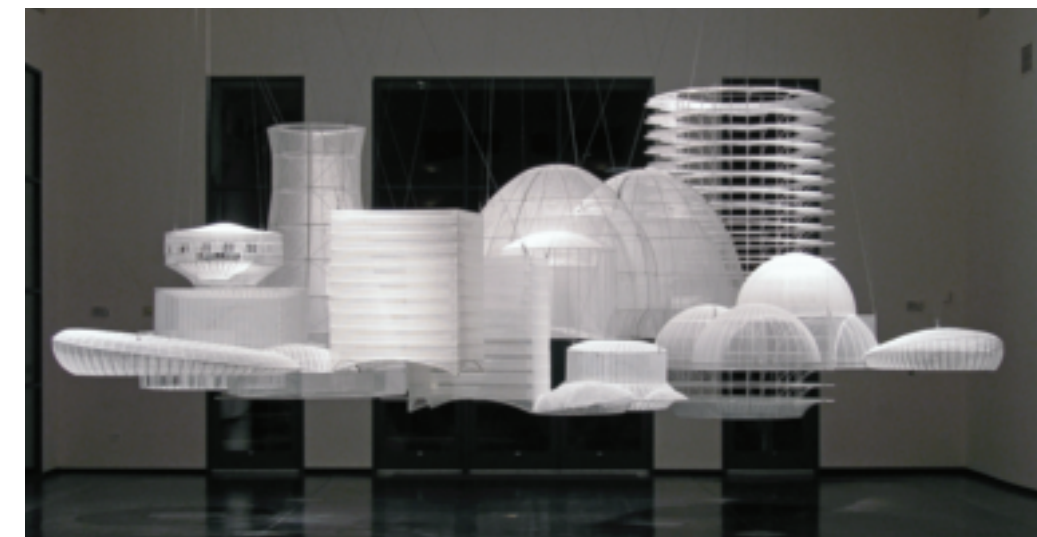
Above: *Model City (Constraint)* (detail), 2015–ongoing. Above right: *Untitled (Blue Cube)*, 1985. Wallboard, metal studs, and paint, 10 x 10 x 10 ft. Right: *New Growth*, 2007. Powder-coated steel, industrial shade cloth, and stainless steel cable, 8 ft. tall; 25 x 20 ft. area.



action. In this way, I see my sculptures as models for imagined built spaces, but of an uncertain scale.

**ADVA:** *Your recent solo show, “Dis-assembling Utopias,” included Model City (Constraint)—a sprawling installation of buildings made from foam core, cardstock, and paper. This is the second phase of a project that you began in 2013, which seems like a shift away from the more biomorphic forms. How did this new work come about?*

**KB:** The notion that my sculptural objects are really architectural models has always been there; but, in my enthusiasm for the possibilities of complex curves and contours, I departed from my early love for simple planar constructions. *Model City (Stage One)* felt like a return to something I thought was finished but was not. In my first year of graduate school at Yale, in 1985, I built a 10-foot blue cube made of wallboard and surfaced to suggest (I hoped) a single cast plastic block. This cube had an accessible interior space with what appeared to be sliced-out corridors and window slots. It was, for me, a large object—a small building and, of course, a model. At that time, I was building primarily with standard two-by-fours and Sheetrock. So, my constructions were all about inventing ways to work within the self-imposed limitation of using



only flat, two-dimensional planes to create three-dimensional forms. I was interested in the power dynamics at play in the notion of the “hide,” the tensions between looking and being looked at through narrow slots, and the ambiguities inherent in structures that offer protection but also entrapment. Those investigations went on hold for a time, while I explored what I could construct by “drawing” with skeletal frames covered in semi-transparent scrims or stacking flat translucent polycarbonate sheets to create contoured, multi-level, topographic forms. And who can say really? Maybe the buoyant, light-filled structures come from a more optimistic state of mind.

In any case, a number of factors led me back to the planar models. I found myself thinking again about the dynamics of architecture and control, as well as the growing tensions between the natural and the built environment. Though I was drawn to and continued to make work inspired by buildings that merge with landscape or mimic plant or animal morphologies, I realized that I still had a guilty fascination with unadorned, unyielding geometries, austere plazas, and brutal concrete block volumes. Then, four years ago, I was challenged with some rather serious health issues, so the reality of being physically limited for a time left me no choice but to change my process. I began to work on small constructions that required only the most basic tools—a cutting board, a table, glue, cardstock scraps, and paper. I was working with what were essentially just office supplies. A dozen or so planar forms soon grew into a kind of inventory of architectural phenotypes. Initially I had the notion of displaying them specimen-like in a grid or arranged on a table to suggest a catalogued collection, but I soon began to combine the distinct units into a single

TOP LEFT: SIEMON ALLEN / RIGHT, TOP AND BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST





*Fragments*, 2015–ongoing. Digital print on magnetic sheet, dimensions variable.

spreading form. I liked the open-ended nature of the process. I could configure and reconfigure the parts, and the model city could ultimately grow and expand in response to a site. *Model City*, which is still ongoing, became a mash-up of architectural references, with observation towers, mazes, fortresses, open plazas, and narrow passageways. The work is materially light and rather delicate. I hoped that the monochromatic, chalky white surface would read as a bit obsessive and relentless, that the thin planar material could be used to suggest weight and volume. And there is still a reference to biological architecture in the form of a section built with tightly packed hexagonal cells.

**ADVA:** *The show also included Fragments, digital prints that reference collage. How does this work relate to Model City?*

**KB:** As with the architectural models, I was using basic “table top” processes of cutting, sorting, and combining to produce small collages. I had collected old *National Geographic* magazines with no special intent, thinking they might contain useful source material for my model inventory. I started clipping out bits of buildings and objects that I then combined to suggest new kinds of architectural forms. As I added images of small objects from the cutouts, the collages took on a new reading with juxtaposition and scale shifts. A segment of a shoe merged with a cathedral ceiling. An antique bell and a copper-clad city hall dome occupied the same landscape. A microscopic view from an exotic sponge suggested a massive green explosion. The collage process began as a research method and soon resulted in a series of small discrete works.

I wasn’t really done with exploring scale shift, however, so I scanned and translated the small collages into large digital prints;

but this did not feel like the endpoint either. I cut up the digital prints and mounted sections onto magnetic sheet, which could be attached directly to any wall painted with steel-embedded paint. *Fragments* became a series of progressive collage actions, beginning with the original magazine cutouts configured and glued onto paper, reconfigured in a scanning process, and later reconfigured again on the gallery wall. The original images were combined and recombined in ways that suggested morphing and growth.

**ADVA:** *They also seem somewhat playful and provisional.*

**KB:** Absolutely. They were conceived as highly provisional, dynamic forms. I see them as assemblages, and they also read like rhizomes or microorganisms about to expand through some kind of aggressive budding. I imagine they might break apart to reproduce. They are massive floating cities that resist gravity and drift and tumble.

**ADVA:** *In the catalogue, the artist and writer Massa Lemu theorized Model City (Constraint) as hegemonic structures of power. How do you think about it?*

**KB:** I am interested in how notions of power are inherent in looking and being looked at, in being concealed or revealed within an architectural space. I am also interested in how built structures embrace, contain, shelter, and frame the individuals who inhabit them. Massa’s text broadened that conversation from an abstract notion of a single body in a space into the larger social dynamics of the urban landscape. Who is in the tower? Who is on the ground? Who is protected behind the walls? Who is imprisoned? What does the term “fortress mentality” mean both literally and figuratively? His questioning of failed utopias seen through the lens of development projects in postcolonial Southern Africa also expanded ways of thinking about the constructed environment through the work,

MIKE HALL



Right and detail: *Model City (Stage One)*, 2013. Paper, foam core, cardstock, paint, and glue, approx. 4.49 x 14 x 10 ft.

about the kind of sinister quality that resides in an environment of unyielding concrete masses. And yet, I can’t deny having a contradictory fascination with such buildings.

**ADVA:** *Is this explored in the video Modern World, which I believe was made after Fragments and Model City (Constraint) were exhibited?*

**KB:** Yes, *Modern World* definitely explored my love-hate relationship with certain kinds of architecture. After the Commune.1 exhibition, I was in research mode. I visited the Built Environment Library at the University of Cape Town and asked the librarian about old magazines. She led me to a small storage room filled with bound architecture periodicals. I started randomly looking through issues from the 1940s to ’70s, and I was frankly blown away, engrossed by page after page of stark black and white images of International Style buildings in Southern Africa. It was immediately clear to me that I needed to return and explore this archive more fully, and I did. The result was a number of intense days of note-taking and image-scanning. What began as picture research led directly to a new work.

Originally I had the intention of using the scanned images to do a slide show. As with the planar models, I was initially thinking about an inventory. Yet I knew that I wanted the video to have a cinematic presence, with massive projected images. In putting the “slide show” together and having to make choices around timing, the possibilities for introducing a more considered rhythm emerged. I began experimenting with drum tracks, keying the speed of the flashing images to changes in tempo. With increasingly rapid pacing, buildings read more and more like flat shapes, ultimately progressing into abstract pattern. Images of

SEMON ALLEN

brute buildings come in rapid punches—almost assaultive. Someone observed that it felt like brainwashing, others called it hypnotic.

**ADVA:** *In terms of art history, who or what have you been influenced by?*

**KB:** I am not sure about influences. Sometimes I think of my engagement with art history as a series of eccentric misreads. That said, there are encounters that I feel have stayed with me over the years. I still remember seeing Jackie Winsor’s cubes at Paula Cooper Gallery for the first time in 1984. I was obsessed with the interiors, with how I felt grounded in the geometry but aware of a human presence. I’ve been in love with Russian Constructivism from the moment I came across an image of Malevich on his deathbed surrounded by his works. In undergraduate school, I used a pile of square and trapezoidal graphite drawings to make a little analogue animation called *Malevich’s Dream*. Whenever I get the opportunity to stand in front of his paintings, I am happy; I rediscover the materiality of surfaces not fully appreciated in reproductions and what, for me, is a spiritual presence. I am drawn to traditions in geometric abstraction and pattern that do not resist representation in a Modernist sense, but rather seek to touch a reality behind the visible. I still have faded Xeroxes from the pre-Internet days of image sampling that include El Lissitzky’s *Prouns*, Constant Nieuwenhuys’s *New Babylon*, and pages from Paolo Soleri’s *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man*. These continue to inform my conversations around the ecologies of built space. I was deeply into Theosophy in high school, fascinated by the weird science and mysticism. I still have quite a few books from that time, including one tattered old hardback with Annie Besant’s “thought-forms.” I keep returning to images and writings on de Chirico’s arcades and Kurt Schwitters’s *Merzbau*.

**ADVA:** *Your work blurs divisions between architecture and sculpture, merging the two disciplines. What do you think is the difference between them?*

**KB:** Maybe to me there is no difference. I am always asking how architecture behaves as a sculptural object and how a sculptural object behaves as architecture. Perhaps the fact that I can’t answer that question is part of what drives my studio inquiry.

*Amanda Dalla Villa Adams is a visual arts writer based in Richmond and a PhD candidate in Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University.*