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ALAN SARET

by Jonathan Crary

Alan Saret's place in the history of late Sixties art has never been adequately examined. Because Saret severed all his gallery connections, seeking alternative means of exposing his work, he has not received the coverage or attention that otherwise would have been his. Also he was ill-served by his inclusion in Robert Morris' "Anti-Form" article in 1968. Not only did this title create enduring misconceptions about the nature of the developments presented, but the essay set up the artists included to look like children of a movement that Morris had fathered. Independently, and before Morris began his felt pieces, Saret had been working to free his sculpture from the precision and measured constraints of minimalism, experimenting with the lightweight and flexible properties of sheet and wire materials. His art was "anti-ruler and measure" but not "anti-form."

Although his current work can be traced back to ideas associated with post-minimalism, his recent projects seem tied to a fundamentally different set of concerns. His work continues to elaborate systems of matter-processing, but he has moved decisively away from a preoccupation with aesthetic and perceptual problems and his art now explicitly identified with questions of human and social transformation. The ambitions that guide his work, notably the creation of a spiritual ambience through a synthesis of culture and nature, distinguish him as a visionary artist.

A recent major project, the "Ghosthouse," constructed at Artpark in 1975, is representative of his current orientation. It is a distinctly architectural undertaking, reflecting Saret's own original training as an architect and perhaps to some extent his work under Paolo Soleri. He was specifically concerned with the problem of shelter as a basic material need of human life, and aesthetic questions became inseparable from social and ecological ones.

The "Ghosthouse," in one sense, is a critique of the use of materials in a technologically advanced society. It is built completely out of steel and plastic, two substances that typify the waste and misuse of the products of modern industry, and the house is a demonstration of how such materials can be used efficiently and imaginatively. The basic stuffs he worked with were long rolls of ordinary steel fencing; he devised an intricate system of folding large sections of the fencing into extended units, which were then assembled to form the house. Pieces of very thin plastic were attached to it, like a skin, for protection against sun and rain.

For Saret, one of the major formal achievements of the "Ghosthouse" was the absence of any monolithic structural elements. Using non-rigid, flexible substances, as in much of his earlier sculpture, he has effected an open "dispersal of structural

material" in which no element is thicker than an eighth of an inch. Its name was derived, in part, from the fact that structure is more absent than present. In a sense, he has approximated the fineness of an organic form that is both translucent and responsive to the touch, like a leaf or membrane. He wanted to create the feeling of a breathing, luminous canopy. For Saret, "it was like a hollow mountain inside, but like a mountain turned to meshwork so it is very permeable to light, and the light is caught on a multitude of delicate veils." And the harmonious effect of light on the inhabitants of the house was of paramount importance to him.

The "Ghosthouse" recalls the architecture of the German visionaries in the early `920s: the crystalline projects of Bruno Taut and the biomorphic forms of Hermann Finsterlin. But it is equally a descendant of Paxton's Crystal Palace, with which it shares a lightweight and light-filled structural aesthetic. Of the tidal area of the "Ghosthouse"'s metal meshwork structure, ninety percent was void. It is this economical and minimal use of steel that sets his work in opposition to Richard Serra's or any art that celebrates masses of densely concentrated metal.

Significantly the "Ghosthouse" was built out of materials available at a hardware store, and it was erected by untrained workers. It was not constructed according to a pre-planned design; the specific form that the house finally assumed emerged out of the process of working on it. It seems to have been a development to which different people contributed and which changing circumstances modified. As in his work of the Sixties, indeterminacy and chance were factors in its realization. Even in its final state Saret did not feel it was complete or wholly satisfactory; it was a tentative statement, part of an ongoing process of formulating principles for new systems of building.

His projects in the near future include finding a piece of land on which to reerect the "Ghosthouse'' and continue his architectural investigations. But he is equally interested in working on agricultural problems and studying wind and solar energy. For him, art is bound up with the material fabric of human life and is assessing other artists he is as interested in the way they actually live as in their art work.

Saret, who has lived in India, combines a deep interest in mysticism ad eastern religions with a belief in the revolutionary potential of architecture. It might be misleading to call his work political, fr his frame of reference is definitely cosmic, but his art is linked with a radical social analysis and a grim appraisal of the present state of the earth. He believes strongly that artists should be implicated in an effort to work out a balance between nature and technology, and he sees the role of the artist as analogous to that of a healer. Saret has recalled that Father Divine had a method of healing that consisted of fixing in his mind an image of the sick person as healthy, a "well vision." The visionary artist, likewise, he believes, needs to have an image of human society in good health, in a resplendent harmony with the natural world.