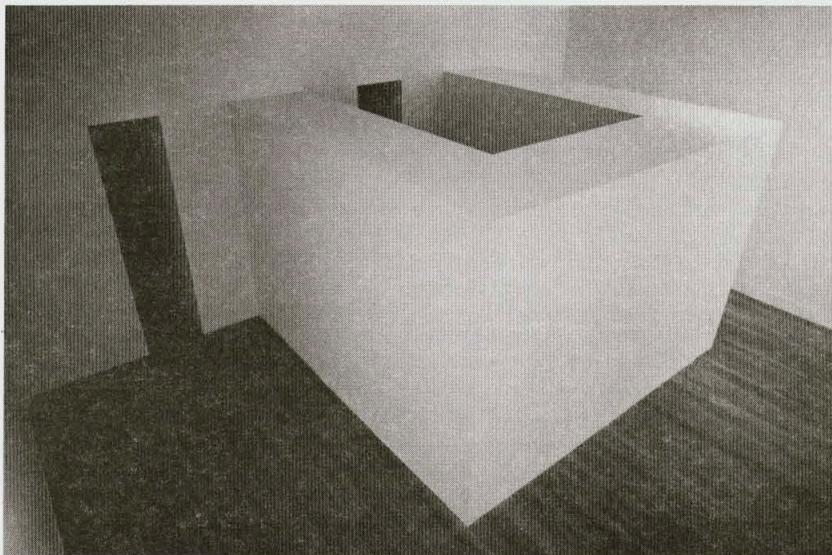
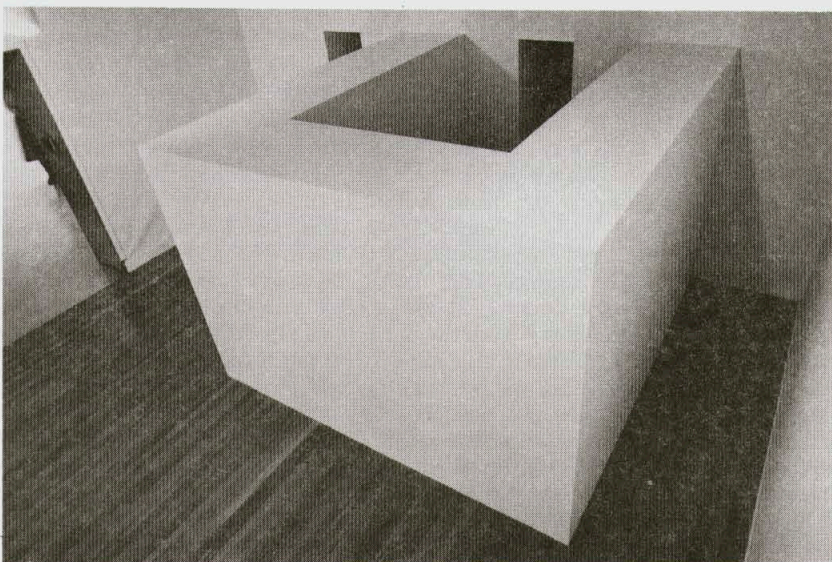


Photographs by the artist



Diplopia, 1980, looking south



Diplopia, 1980, looking north

Peter Berg's visual language is deceptively simple. The plain white wall which divides the MATRIX gallery in half is virtually indistinguishable from the actual gallery space itself. The cubic mass extending out into each half of the divided gallery is similarly innocuous in an architectural sense and is apparently (although not actually) solid. A dark, tunnel-like corridor, 18 inches wide and 6 feet high, cuts into Berg's wall and provides just enough room for passage. Berg is deliberate in his choice of these constricting dimensions, using them in all of his sculpture because they allow just enough space for a person of average size to move through the passages and thus emphasize the physical and psychological state of passage. Facing Berg's wall it is not clear what, if anything, lies behind it and moving through the passage gives no further information about the far side of the wall.

Each dark passage into the wall leads, after two 90° turns to the right, into a light, enclosed "room", three of whose walls are six feet high, just high enough to preclude the possibility of seeing over them. The only way to escape the somewhat constrained space of this "room" is to retrace the path through the dark passage to the original point of entry. Movement is from light into darkness into light (and back again), part of a series of physical and visual oppositions which characterize the work. As we move through the passages and back and forth between one half of the MATRIX space and the other, forced as we are to leave the gallery and to go through Avery Court, do we know how the apparently identical solids and voids of Berg's sculpture are related? Can we be sure that the wall seen in one half of the gallery is the same wall which appears in the other half, even though its physical configurations are exactly the same? Can we plot the carefully ordered interplay of geometrical units and passages? Are we aware that

what has been a void on one side of the wall inverts itself to a solid on the other side of the wall? Do we comprehend the forms of the sculpture more clearly because our experience of them is doubled (hence the title Diplopia, meaning seeing double)? Can we be sure that the two halves of the total experience are, in fact, identical?

Berg presents us with something more than a test of our abilities to reconstruct our spatial activities, however. By extension, Berg's challenge, although focused on spatial forms and movement, is to our abilities to perceive and describe any event in a way which is truthful to that event. On the one hand Berg has stripped down his visual language and given us a structurally precise and interlocking system in order to pose such questions with renewed clarity and urgency. Nothing in his environment distracts from the immediacy of the issues of perception and evaluation with which he is concerned. On the other hand Berg's sculpture, despite its astringent forms, never approximates the dryness of a logical theorem. On the contrary, it provides an experience which echoes the mythic and emotionally charged environments explored since prehistoric time and given concrete form in a geometrical shape closely related to Berg's, namely the labyrinth.

The labyrinth seems to be a pan-cultural symbol extending back to pre-historic visual records. The enclosed spaces of the labyrinth provide a situation in which the participant can look neither backward nor forward. Wandering through the labyrinth ends only at the center space which in virtually all cases is sacred; this center marks a complete transformation for the participant from the ordinary life of the exterior spaces to the sacralized or ritually purified life of the interior. In ancient Egypt, for example, seals dating from the third millennium before Christ indicate that the center of a simple labyrinth (which takes the form of the

"palace sign" hieroglyph) housed the presence of the king-god; at this center priests slew the sacrificial bull, the symbol of the king-god whose presence was mystically renewed by the ritual. The Egyptian deity, like the later Christian deity, transcended death; the ritualized environment gave power to the king which allowed him to overcome human limitations. The subsequent Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur transformed the Egyptian focus of the ritual so that Theseus, a new prince, usurped the role of the god-ruler at the center of the labyrinth at Knossos by slaying the Minotaur and thus was able to found a new dynasty at Athens.

Much later the transcendent sacredness of the heart of the labyrinth was reinterpreted in medieval pavement intarsias of labyrinths in such cathedrals as Reims, Chartres and Lucca, among others. The path of the labyrinth marked the Christian's progress towards salvation, with Jerusalem at the center of the labyrinth as a symbol of the heavenly Jerusalem where the eternal presence of the deity was manifest.

The meandering path to an enclosed interior space typical of the labyrinth is also a critical aspect of Berg's sculpture. Participation in that central space is a means of hallowing and transforming existence in the exterior world. Mircea Eliade writes of this sacralization and re-ordering of the forces of the world in ways that are pertinent to Berg's

Diplopia: "Establishment in a particular place, organizing it, inhabiting it, are acts that presuppose an existential choice - the choice of a universe that one is prepared to assume by 'creating' it. Now this universe is always the replica of the paradigmatic universe created and inhabited by the gods; hence it shares the sanctity of the god's work." (The Sacred and the Profane, New York, 1961, p. 34).

Participation in Berg's sculpture is participation in this

"existential choice" of creation. It is a curiosity of our secular modern age that the artist now plays the role assigned by traditional cultures to the shaman or the priest, and that the museum has become the locus of the re-vivifying experience traditionally located in the domain of the sacred precinct. The fact that Berg destroys all his sculpture after the stipulated exhibition time marks something more than a removal of the artist from the current mania for art as valuable economic and commercial product. More importantly Berg, with his radically simplified structural language, provides a plan for a ritualized movement which leads to the experience of that sacralized center of the labyrinth. The differences between the ancient labyrinth and Berg's sculpture, of course, distinguish Berg's vision as a distinctly modern one. For no holy person leads us into the centers of Berg's sculpture; and once at that center we find not the bull, not the king-god, but only ourselves in the emptiness. Eliade's "existential choice" could hardly have a more eloquent formulation.

Peter Berg was born in New York City in 1948 and spent his early childhood in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Since 1960, Berg has lived in New York City. He received his BFA from the Pratt Institute in 1970.

John Paoletti, Guest Curator
Department of Art History
Wesleyan University
Middletown, Connecticut

Works in MATRIX:

Diplopia, 1980, room-size installation, sheetrock walls painted white.

Unspecific Drawing/Proposal,
Wadsworth Atheneum/MATRIX, Hartford, 1979, ink and typescript on graph paper, 11" x 8½". Lent by the artist.

Diplopia, 1980, pencil and photographs on paper, 33 3/4" x 72". Lent by the artist.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
542 La Guardia Place, NYC '74;
Graduate Center, City University
of New York, NYC '76; Center for
the Arts, Wesleyan University,
Middletown, CT '77; Bertha Urdang
Gallery, NYC '77; Akron Art Insti-
tute, Akron, OH '78; Herbert F.
Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell
University, Ithaca, NY '78;
Museum of Art, Williams College,
Williamstown, MA '79; Contem-
porary Arts Center, Cincinnati '79;
Elise Meyer Gallery, NYC '80;
Artra Studio, Milan '80.

Selected group exhibitions:
Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT
Contemporary Reflections '76;
Joseloff Gallery, University of
Hartford, West Hartford, CT
Aycock, Berg, Dallas '76; John
Weber Gallery, NYC '76; Bertha
Urdang Gallery, NYC 5 Sets '77;
West Side Highway, NYC Works To
Be Destroyed '77 (organized by
the artist); Hal Bromm Gallery,
NYC Moving '77; Galerie Influx,
Marseilles '77; University of
Minnesota Art Museum, Deluth, MN
Difficult Decisions, Ethical Di-
lemmas '78; Hayden Gallery, Massa-
chusetts Institute of Technology,
Cambridge, MA Two Views Two
Sculptures: Peter Berg, Ed Roth-
farb '79; Philadelphia College
of Art, Philadelphia Afterimages
'79; Wright State University,
Dayton, OH Pyramidal Influence
in Art '80 (traveling exhibition
organized by the artist; cata-
logue contains essays by six art
historians; exhibition contains
work by 13 artists); Interna-
tional Cultureel Centrum, Antwerp
Beyond Surface '80.

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no. 1 (February '78), p. 64.

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Filling in the Holes," Artforum,
vol. 16, no. 9 (May '78), p. 50+.

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Two Sculptures: Peter Berg Ed
Rothfarb (interview with the
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Center '79.

Bex, Florent. Beyond Surface,
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(Antwerp, Belgium) '80.

Kuspit, Donald. "Peter Berg
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vol. 68, no. 6 (Summer '80),
p. 158.

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