

# **Projects 49 : Nancy Rubins : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 26-March 14, 1995**

Author

Rubins, Nancy, 1952-

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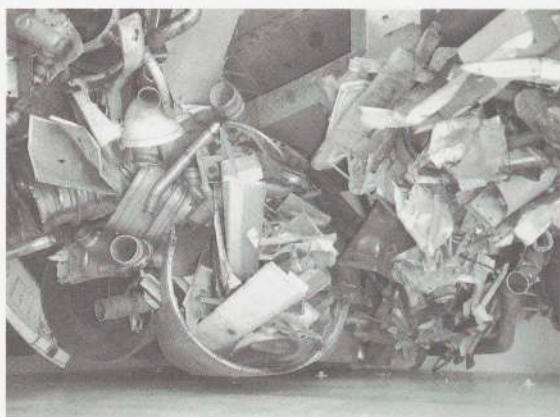
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49

nancy rubins

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art  
New York**

**January 26 – March 14, 1995**

**N**ancy Rubins's sculptures overwhelm and visually expand the spaces in which they are displayed. Since the mid-1970s, Rubins has worked with cast-off materials, mostly identifiable objects such as electrical appliances and industrial parts, to create sculptures whose energetic compositions transcend the weight of their materials and transform their appearance. Her robust sculptures take shape during the process of construction, in response to the proportions of the spaces in which they are built. In *Trailers and Hot Water Heaters* (1992) Rubins tumbled together mobile homes and water heaters in a precarious balance between ceiling and floor, overwhelming the warehouse space of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. Some of Rubins's pieces have been constructed outdoors: *Worlds Apart* (1982) was a composite work in which Rubins amassed hundreds of radios, hair dryers, toasters, and other appliances in a forty-foot tornado in Washington, D.C. Recently, for the 1993 Venice Biennale, she suspended her *Mattresses and Cakes* construction in a large space, endowing it with the energy and drama of a baroque altarpiece.

Rubins acknowledges the potential to read a condemnation of consumer culture in her works, but she is more concerned with the compositional energy that is created when objects are combined in great numbers. Her recent sculptures (whose titles focus attention on the component objects: *4,000 Pounds of Smashed and Filleted Airplane Parts*, *150 Baltimore Mattresses*, *71 Mattresses*, *Steel and Wire*) are powerful compositions in which the artist and her construction team have tamed and re-formed ordinary discarded objects, charging their shapes with heroic intention.

In this installation, titled *MoMA and Airplane Parts*, the ensemble of airplane wings, fuselages, and internal parts spirals out from the center of the gallery space, and toward the windows overlooking the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture garden. It is a huge, organic, and animated construction that seems threatening yet strangely beautiful. The scenographic aspect of the work is a result of Rubins's careful planning of the piece, which began only two months before construction started. The following edited conversation is drawn from an interview with the artist which took place on December 22, 1994.

Sheryl Conkelton  
Associate Curator  
Department of Photography



*Mattresses and Cakes*, 1993. Installation for the Aperto at the 45th Biennale, Venice.

**Sheryl Conkelton:** Your interest in certain kinds of materials and in large scale appears to have been very consistent throughout your career. What were your concerns when you started making art?

**Nancy Rubins:** I attended undergraduate school at the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore. I was a painting major because the teachers who were the most interesting to me taught in that department: Sal Scarpitta and Babe Shapiro. But I did a lot of work with ceramics. In the ceramics department we had a really terrific guy, Doug Baldwin, who was encouraging and enthusiastic. He helped the students to explore their own ideas and to not feel locked up in craftsmanship. That's really why I went to that school. I was able to make sculpture there and not worry about firing it. I just built the stuff out of clay, looked at it, and took pictures. I could make mass quantities of work and not worry about it going to a kiln; not worry if it was too big, or if it was too thick. I could just forget about the technical aspects of ceramics and really focus on the work. That was a very liberating experience for me.

**SC:** You never worried about keeping the pieces themselves or some kind of record of your work beyond the photograph?

**NR:** No. I just tried to figure out form, and how things stood and fell, and how to make things. The things I made were terribly ugly and I really didn't want to make them last forever. I wanted to make them as tools for myself to get from one place to another, not a physical but a conceptual place.

**SC:** Most of the works for which you are well known are massive in scale, and they sculpt or recreate the space in which they are seen.

**NR:** The reason I started making things so humongous wasn't really because I thought "big is better." The ceramics started getting bigger and bigger. Then I started making drawings in graduate school, because I always had an enormous amount of energy, almost too much energy. I had to find a way to direct the energy I had, find some place to put it. That was a wonderful thing about the drawings. When I first started making them, I would draw on any scrap of paper or wood, or whatever I could find. I would pencil on a huge piece of paper that was seventeen feet across, scribbling densely until it became this other kind of matter. Layers and layers of graphite became a dense space that embodied a lot of contradictions. It looked very heavy, it felt very dense, yet it was just a piece of paper and it was really light. It seemed to me like it went on forever, but it was just a piece of paper. It wasn't a drawing that was an illustration. I really liked that it caught every gesture. It caught the process. It caught the moment I existed in, keeping it there as you looked at it some time later. It embraced the energy. At that time, when I was a student, process work was really important, and these drawings represented my process of working.

**SC:** When did you start working with accumulations of objects?

**NR:** When I got out of graduate school in 1976, I had a variety of jobs. I was teaching a painting class at night at the San Francisco Art Institute and I was waitressing during the day. I didn't have that much time in the studio. I would drive to my teaching job and take off my waitress uniform in the bathroom. But I would go to Goodwill and the Salvation Army stores with my friend who would find clothes there. I would find television sets in their "as is" pile. They were only twenty-five or fifty cents—huge consoles, made of plastic that looked like wood. Even if they didn't work, they were still twenty-five cents' worth of good stuff. I had read about Grandma Brisbee at that time, and I was really fascinated by what she did with junk and bottles, and how she built houses



from these things. So I started thinking about her. I looked at those TVs and thought about my family and how it was a big deal when we got a TV. We were allowed to watch one hour of "Walt Disney" on Sunday night and then another show, "The 20th Century." TV was always fascinating because we weren't allowed to watch much of it. I could get a lot of these TVs, so I started filling my car every week with as many as I could. I collected 239 of them.

**SC:** *Just TVs, Nancy—nothing else?*

**NR:** Yes. I lived on Mission Street in San Francisco, in a loft, and rights to the roof were in my lease. It had this beautiful view of romantic San Francisco, but I didn't feel romantic or beautiful. My idea was to put these TVs on the roof, in the silhouette of the cityscape, and I was going to paint them fluorescent orange. At a certain point the accumulation of TVs would overwhelm the cityscape. Well, the landlord got wind of it and told me that they would fall off the roof and kill someone, so I never built that piece. But I ended up building a piece in my studio with some of the TVs, packing them with concrete, and painting them with fluorescent orange paint. I packed a bunch of paint cans in the concrete base. At that time I had stopped the waitressing job and had started a house painting company. Once I finished the piece, I really disliked it. It didn't work for me. Something didn't happen, the TVs never really transcended their TV-ness.

One night I was sitting up late with my neighbors, the artists Tom and Connie Hatch, and an earthquake came through. I saw for the first time what they did. A big industrial lamp swung back and forth, and the walls moved in this undulating fashion, as if a wave was going through them. My building had concrete walls, and I was amazed that this thing that I considered so big and hard could, in the right conditions, become fluid, like water. It wasn't like the drawings, it was the opposite. It was a contradiction: it was really hard, but it was fluid. I thought that was remarkable. So I started building these very thin concrete walls. They were one-quarter-inch thick and about twelve feet tall. I built maybe four or five of them. First I built a plywood wall, and then I put up re-bar [reinforcement bar] and expanded metal [mesh]. Then I slopped the concrete onto the metal with my hands. It was just the thickness of the re-bar, clinging onto the expanded metal. One side, where the wood had been, was very, very smooth, and on the other side you could see the hand marks. You could push on these concrete walls and they would flex back and forth about a foot or so. They didn't crack, they didn't break. They became these flexible forms. I really loved that.

Then I got a teaching job at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, filling in for someone who was taking a sabbatical leave for a semester. There was a convent near my apartment. The nuns there had built this weird little thing with rocks, concrete, shelves, and little crucifixes. It seemed like an offering to Jesus. It was sweet, and I was very touched by the personal objects in it. I started driving back to Goodwill and Salvation Army stores just to look around. There were little hairdryers in funny colors that I remember having in high school, electric shavers, things to cook hot dogs with that looked like they electrocuted the hot dogs—every appliance in the book, things that you didn't know existed. I realized that they had appliances that were small enough that I could fill my car with them for a few dollars. So I collected literally thousands of these things and started thinking about the concrete wall and the television, and how the television didn't work, and how the concrete did; and how the nuns used these small things that worked for them. I started a sculpture, making two rows a day. I built a wall that was about twenty-two feet long and went to the ceiling. It was a really wonderful piece: a really thin wall of concrete with

no metal in it except the metal of the appliances. It held together in this kind of organic way. It was huge, but at the same time I could push it and it would waver back and forth. The appliances for me were able to become something other than appliances: they were able to transcend what they originally were. En masse, all together like that, something else happened. . . . You could really get lost in them. They almost became a piece of archaeology.

**SC:** *One of the things that I've noticed in your later pieces is that there is a scenographic quality to them. They're about familiar, even domestic objects caught up in a great movement.*

**NR:** It is something that I strive for: to endow things with a certain kind of energy, to put them in a situation you would never see them in normally. When Chris [Burden] and I first moved out to Topanga, there was a very tiny, steep, dirt road. One day someone tried to get a house trailer up it. It seemed impossible, and the trailer did get stuck. It slipped off the road and you could see its underbelly, almost like a big beast coming up out of water. It was the strangest thing that I had ever seen.

From where I live, you can see development everywhere. It's this huge exploding growth. I drive out to the desert to find airplane parts and I see these huge developments of big pink buildings that have been quickly and shoddily built. I see it as this kind of absurd, uncontrolled energy.

**SC:** *Does your interest in the developments have something to do with how quickly they go up and how so much is marshalled together artificially?*

**NR:** Well, they go up so fast that you feel a certain temporariness about them. When you go to Europe, or even New York, you see buildings that have been there for so long. Some buildings have been there at least a hundred years or so. You see things that have some kind of history. But with these buildings, you almost get the feeling that in twenty or thirty years they are going to fall apart, or that they start to fall apart as soon as they are built. It's almost like a leaf or a stick rotting in the ground. . . . It's this constant state of change. There is a relationship between this kind of energy and the kind of dynamic I work with in my sculpture, which is about certain kinds of visceral response. If I walk by a huge, magnificent Richard Serra piece, I truly get a physical sensation that I can't explain. For me, some of his pieces are so powerful that I literally cannot go near them. He's really coming from a different direction, but there is something in common there. There is a kinship—I think it may have to do with a certain kind of precariousness.

**SC:** *Even though there is an overall sense of energy in your sculptures that overwhelms the individual objects, they are still recognizable. Rather than a narrative component there is a Wizard-of-Oz tornado effect: we can see real things have been incorporated. How are the specific objects meaningful?*

**NR:** The material part is interesting to me because the objects I chose at first seemed ridiculous and absurd. They just seemed outrageous to me—so many appliances, so many cute colors, I couldn't believe there were so many. When I moved to L.A. in 1982 and started looking around, I began to notice mobile homes. Somehow they had the same kind of disturbing and absurd qualities that the appliances



had. I started thinking about the trailers in terms of the appliances and in terms of human beings. All have complex internal systems. I collected trailers for a piece I did in San Francisco called *Six Mobile Homes*, and I saw how badly they were made. I cut them into parts and they fell apart like a house of cards. There's no structural integrity at all. Like human bodies, they're very fragile.

When Chris and I began driving out into the desert, I discovered airplane parts. Like the appliances, they were beautiful and there was an abundance of them. I could never make these things if I tried, and there was no way I could afford all of it. It just seemed like marvelous stuff. The first thing I built was this piece called *4,000 Pounds of Smashed and Filleted Airplane Parts* in this old funky hotel here in L.A. in a one-night show. Somehow things worked for me with those airplanes. I loved that I didn't know what most of the parts were. They seemed exotic and beautiful, and beautifully made, and they were so much fun to work with. They are mysterious to me and loaded; I think of everyone who might have touched them. It's the same with the appliances: I think about all the people who used them, the conversations they had, the waffle that the waffle iron made, legs that the shaver shaved, or the faces, or the armpits.

**SC:** *Each of your sculptures contains traces of such past experiences, but a major issue in your work also seems to be the sheer volume of material production in our culture.*

**NR:** When I was talking about the houses in the developments you see emerging all over California, I kept thinking of a certain kind of rampant cellular growth, an organic growth. You read about the new ideas about the universe, how stars are made, how galaxies are made, and how it's continually growing and developing. . . . I guess I think of the building in this rampant, organic, almost biological way. I like this notion of wild, organic growth that is continuous and doesn't stop with the things we build, even though the things we make are plastic and metal and inanimate. I think of them as continuing this organic expansion which is beautiful and frightening at the same time.

**SC:** *And the objects are caught up in the web of how we live and produce and discard.*

**NR:** Yes, but I don't consider it an ecological statement. I realize that it is hard not to connect my work to that message, but I don't really think of it that way. Instead, it is an acknowledgment of gross quantity and huge energy.

**SC:** *You work in a very intuitive way, which acknowledges that energy can be accumulated. But there is a certain amount of planning necessary for each work, particularly since you work with a crew. Could you talk a little about the collaborative process?*

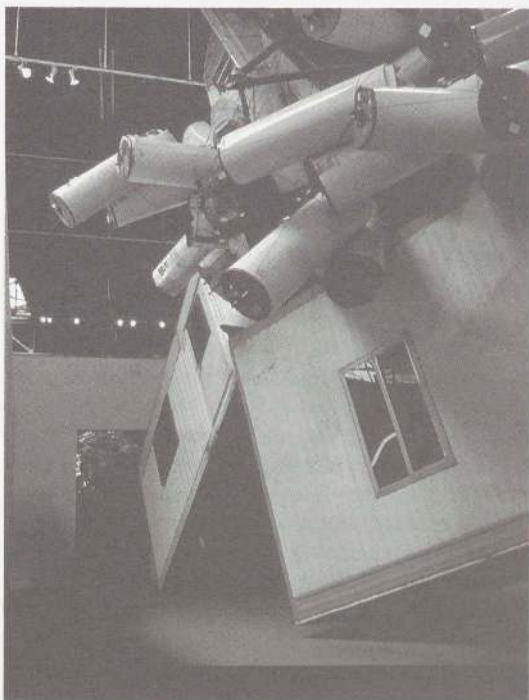
**NR:** The energy involved in construction of the work is really important. It can't be methodical drudgery. The people who work with me end up becoming elements in the work, too, because they contribute their knowledge and abilities. It becomes a kind of system; there is a connection to the way people work in groups in offices or factories. I like to think of this way of working as more connected to life. . . . I think that my sources come more out of real life and the connections to art are after the fact.

**SC:** Let's talk about the MoMA sculpture. What was it about the physical situation or the idea of the institution that inspired you?

**NR:** The title of the piece will be *MoMA and Airplane Parts*. I asked myself, "Should it be about the building? Should it be about the museum?" I've come to MoMA ever since I was a child. It was the museum of museums. I remember the sculpture garden and the little alcove on the way to the café. I remember very distinctly walking into that area . . . the wall was moved out later, to enlarge it. I wanted to make a piece that would not just sit in that room, but that would become something which really activates the space and perhaps alters the way people think about it and use it. I want the sculpture to emerge from the space, to come out toward you like a great growth of some kind. I would like it to stimulate your imagination to allow it to go on and on and on, into Manhattan, and out across the river. The sculpture will lurch over to the glass windows, moving out toward the sculpture garden. It won't touch the glass, but it will reach out to the sculpture. Will it be sculpture or not? I think of my work as sculpture, but it's not something that you could move and set up again. It's this other entity that is difficult to contain.

**SC:** I tend to think about sculpture—as opposed to installation or architecture—as being something that people can interact with easily, something human-scaled, more of an equal contest between the viewer and the piece. Yet your sculptures are threatening and overwhelming, in part because of the size. You create a sense of precariousness with gigantic size.

**NR:** That's what I think about when we go into the San Fernando Valley. Coming over the hill and seeing all of that enormous development and grid of streets and lights . . . it's huge, beyond comprehension, and out of control. I'm interested in that idea, in breaking certain boundaries with size and energy, in not complying. I don't want to be literal or cerebral in my work: I don't want to create something that is symbolic or has a literal meaning. I want to do something different in my work . . . I want to say something about the limitlessness of energy.



*Trailers and Hot Water Heaters*, 1992. Installation for "Helter Skelter, L.A. Art in the 1990s," at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.



## biography

Born Naples, Texas, 1952

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Maryland Institute of Arts, 1974

Master of Fine Arts, University of California, Davis, 1976

Nancy Rubins is currently Professor of Sculpture at the University of California, Los Angeles. She resides in Topanga, California.

## selected one-person exhibitions

- 1995 Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago
- 1994 Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York
- 1993 Kunstverein Lingen, Lingen, Germany  
Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York
- 1992 Galerie Patrick de Brock, Antwerp  
Miller Nordenhake, Cologne  
Burnett Miller Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1987 "Monument to Megalopolises Past and Future"  
(collaboration with Chris Burden), Los Angeles  
Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE)
- 1986 "Sprockets Moon" (collaboration with Chris Burden),  
New Langton Arts, San Francisco
- 1982 "Worlds Apart," Washington Project for the Arts,  
Washington, D.C.
- 1981 "Big Bil-bored," Cermack Plaza Shopping Center,  
Berwyn, Illinois

## selected group exhibitions

- 1995 Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
- 1994 "inSite 94," San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art  
"Country Sculpture," Le Consortium, Dijon  
"Los Angeles 90'ernes Kunstscene," Kunstforeningen,  
Copenhagen
- 1993 "Thoughts That Fit Like Air," Art and Public, Geneva  
"Enclosion," New York Kunsthalle  
Aperto, 45th Biennale, Venice
- 1992 "Matthew Barney, Sam Reveles, Nancy Rubins,"  
SteinGladstone Gallery, New York  
"LAX," Galerie Ursula Krinzinger, Vienna  
"Helter Skelter, L.A. Art in the 1990s," Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
- 1991 "Lost and Found," Sculpture Center, New York  
"Nancy Rubins, Angela Bullock, John Reilly,"  
The Drawing Center, New York
- 1990 "Art in the Anchorage," Creative Time, New York
- 1988 "Sculpture at the Point," Three Rivers Arts Festival,  
Pittsburgh
- 1986 "Southern California Assemblage," Contemporary Arts  
Forum, Santa Barbara, California
- 1983 New Langton Arts, San Francisco
- 1981 "Art on the Beach," Creative Time, New York

*MoMA and Airplane Parts*, 1995. Courtesy the artist, Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, and Burnett Miller Gallery, Los Angeles.

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Cover: Detail from *Table and Airplane Parts*. Studio installation, 1989.

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