

BOMB

Roxy Paine

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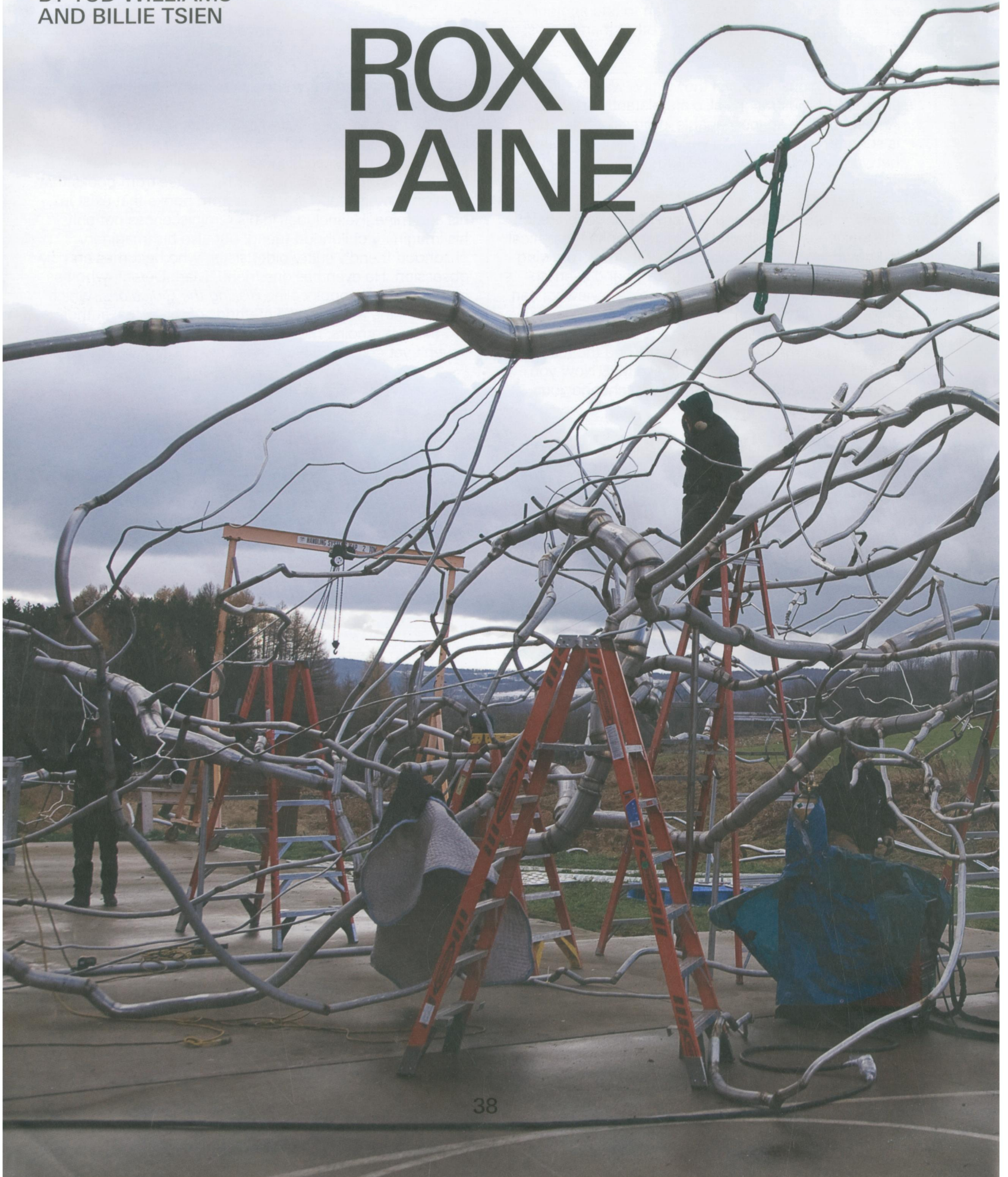
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BOMB

BY TOD WILLIAMS
AND BILLIE TSIEH

ROXY PAINE



As architects we work for many different clients on a wide variety of projects, from private residences to laboratories, swimming pools, libraries, and museums. Each project demands that we research its specific problems and needs. Of the many different types of projects, our favorites are the art-related. We have designed museums ranging from the Downtown Whitney to the American Folk Art Museum and the Barnes Foundation. We also have designed spaces for artists such as Hannah Wilke; collaborated with artists including Carsten Höller and choreographer Elise Monte; installed exhibitions for Louise Nevelson, Agnes Martin, and others; and have integrated works by Sol LeWitt and Julian Opie in our buildings. We predictably appreciate some art because of its architectural form—think of Richard Serra, James Turrell, or Donald Judd. Other art we appreciate because its underlying search and research resonates with our own, even if its results are less obviously architectural.

We first became acquainted with Roxy Paine's work in the late '90s and were instantly attracted to its rigor, intensity, and beauty. In following his work, we became intrigued by how it kept changing from project to project: what could possibly tie together perfect replicas of mushrooms and weed-choked vegetable gardens, showcases with astonishing varieties of Sculpey brushstroke specimens, machine-made abstract paintings, and stainless-steel boulders? Paine pursues each project with a deep intelligence—one that draws us in and changes our conception of our relationship to nature.

We were asked to enter into a conversation with him for BOMB while *Maelstrom*, his piece for the Metropolitan Museum's rooftop sculpture garden, was taking shape. When we visited his studio in Treadwell, New York, we realized that when it comes to his work, as with nature, the closer you get, the more you realize how little you know. Paine trains a personal lens on the world—he breaks things down, analyzes them, searches for clarity. Through our conversation, we attempted to train a lens on him. We might have captured him, although, most likely, he has escaped.

—Tod Williams and Billie Tsien

Tod Williams: We've actually spent nearly three hours just chatting and looking at the tree work—

Roxy Paine: We're actually all talked out.

Billie Tsien: We had the good time *before* we started recording. (*laughter*)

TW: I've been thinking about why I'm attracted to your work . . . I don't know yet. At first what I liked was that you seemed to be exploring very different areas. The work seemed so incredibly varied, but deep and passionate. I remember thinking, What the hell is this person after? I decided that the consistent thing that you do, the conundrum you seem to face, is your relationship with the natural world. I'd like to talk about whether that *is* in fact the conundrum and discuss the issue of production: you're interested in labor, and also, in reproduction. Those are the threads that intrigue me the most. What about you, Billie?

BT: I just want to sideline off the conversation, but I'd like to focus on *Maelstrom*, the sculpture for the

roof garden at the Metropolitan Museum that you just showed us. It's changing my idea of what you're doing.

TW: Well, it seems to me, Roxy, that when you make the (*PMU*) *Painting Manufacture Unit*, a machine for painting, you're questioning how things work, how things are constructed, and how things grow. You both make a painting physically and make the machine that makes it—even your machines are about issues of growth. And when one talks about growth, one is also talking about decay, so your focus is "What is life?" in the biggest possible sense; the conundrum of "Where do I stand relative to life and decay?"

RP: Well, it's also about trying to systematize things that are resistant to being systematized. I'm interested in taking entities that are organic and outside of the industrial realm, feeding them into an industrial system, and seeing what results from that force-feeding. The end results are a seamless containment of these opposites. The machine you mentioned, the *PMU*, takes geologic growth as its starting point and implants that idea into an industrialized

Maelstrom (in progress), 2009, stainless steel, 22 feet high x 140 feet long. Photo: Sofia Paine.

All images © Roxy Paine and courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York.

mode of production. The resulting paintings reference both realms: the geologic and the industrial.

TW: So how is that different, for example, from—I'm sorry, it's naïve—say, a Monet painting? He sees the landscape and has to find a system by which he can attack it and, in a way, bring it into his world. He's created a system by which he can *re-present* his understanding of the landscape. Is your struggle really different from his?

RP: Well, it's quite different and it's quite the same. We're each products of our time. With the *Dendroids* I'm translating the trees into the specific language of industrial pipelines. I started the series in 1998; they all have dendritic structures—trees, neural networks, vascular systems—as their root. *Impostor* was the first in the series, and *Maelstrom* is the most recent example.

TW: But that's why I'm going back to this issue of the artist's historical struggle. It's true you're a product of your time, but I'd say the artist *always* contends with industry, whether it's Michelangelo working on the size of a block of marble or Cézanne with the canvas propped up in the landscape.

RP: I'm referring to the post-industrial revolution, but hold on one sec. (*Gets up and walks away.*)

TW: Roxy has just escaped this interview. . . . He seems to have been offended by that remark and he's left the room. (*laughter*)

RP: (*Walks back into the room.*) I brought some images out so we can actually—

BT: Talk about specifics.

RP: I have to say I hate this format, I always freeze up when there's a microphone in my face; my mind just goes—

TW: There's a napkin there.

RP: Yeah, cover it up. (*Tape recorder is covered with napkin.*)

BT: Anyway, when I look at your work it seems very romantic. But then it's antiromantic at the same time. This stems from a kind of struggle to make the romantic more manly. For instance, *Conjoined*, the two trees in Madison Square Park—even as they are tangled, they seem to be pulling away from each other. They made me think of two separate but entwined lovers, and of the Greek myth of Philemon and Baucis: the faithful couple who, according to their wish to be together in death as in life, are turned into intertwined trees upon dying.

What has always appealed to me is the movement between romance—those things that are natural and beyond control; intuition, for instance, and also emotions—and the process that examines it, puts it through an analytical procedure.

RP: I actually consider myself antiromantic. If the romantic is in the work, I want to collide it with its opposite. For instance, you may at first see *Defunct* as a romantic image: it's an isolated dead tree in the landscape. However, when you see that both the materials and methods of its construction are from heavy industry, and that it has been broken down into component parts and reconstructed, you understand that the romanticism in the piece is tempered by a rationalized, industrialized view of nature.

TW: Is that to tame your romanticism, or to essentially order it?

RP: It's about distrusting it. The work is always about distrusting purity, about wanting to find the cracks in its façade. Romanticism, and its opposite, being completely reason based and analytical, are both flawed when they're pure.

TW: Do you distrust beauty?

RP: I distrust a pure notion of beauty. I distrust a pure notion of ugly as well.

TW: Your *Head Cheese Slices* are fascinating to me, but they're kind of creepy. The depth of the resin and the colors fascinate me. I would say that *Maelstrom* is inherently more beautiful than your *Head Cheese* pieces or *Scumaks*, which seem like gigantic melted lipstick mounds. I'm curious as to why you're now making these powerful, large works that are absolutely beautiful and sensual.

BT: But they're also slightly threatening.

RP: Yeah, *Maelstrom* is also about a completely destructive force.

TW: You're putting it up on the roof of the Met. The museum people will work very hard to make sure it's *not* destructive up there. I know that you are self-critical enough . . . How do you balance the celebration of your work, the lusting after it, with your desire for distrust? Where is that going to take you?

RP: The piece's beauty is not my number one priority. That's just a by-product. For me, something is beautiful when it embodies an enormous complexity in a seamless whole.

BT: I thought of Sleeping Beauty when I looked at a model for one of your *Dendroids*—when I was a child



there was a black and white television show that did all these fairytales in silhouette. Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger, falls under a spell, and goes to sleep for 100 years. All these thorns and vines and trees start covering her completely. The prince has to hack through them. Like with your *Dendroids*, the images of this are both beautiful and threatening—there's a tangle of stuff that you get caught in.

TW: I like the trouble in each of your pieces. You weld them, as you said, to make them flow, but you also expose the system of construction and show the pipe as what it is; it's indicating, as a visual footnote, that there's no illusion . . . it's just welded pipe, no more!

RP: The idea of something existing in several different states simultaneously is very important to me. Like in quantum physics, how you set up the test of light can determine whether the light is a particle or a wave. The light has both of those inherent, antithetical qualities in it simultaneously. Each person's brain is like that test; it measures what it's seeing differently.

TW: So you want to keep as many of these ideas as possible suspended in space, enabling people to be aware of them.

RP: If all those different states are not embedded in there, or if no one cares to interpret them, then the piece is, of course, a failure. I want *Maelstrom* to exist in five simultaneous states, although other people could see others beyond that. On one level, it's a forest that has been downed by an unseen force—a force of nature or, perhaps, a force of man. I also want the sculpture to be the force itself, a swirling, churning force. The word "maelstrom" actually has a Dutch root; it literally means "grinding stream," though it has come to mean a destructive current.

TW: And the third state?

RP: The third state is trees in the state of becoming abstractions. There are areas with recognizable tree parts and then others where representation is stretching, breaking apart, and coalescing again. So I want *Maelstrom* to be in this in-between state. I want the fourth state to be a pipeline in a factory that's run amuck. This is getting back to the root of the material, so to speak, which is purely industrial. Here the piece is embracing its source. And, finally, the fifth state is that of a mental storm, or what I envision happens during an epileptic seizure when—

BT: Sparks and connections get all frazzled.

RP: It's like flowing through a network, a short-circuiting that's spreading through.

TW: Your work has existed in two of those states for some time: the state of the pipe, the material, and the state of the tree. Although I have the feeling that the tree was never a tree, it was always transformed, and the pipes were never pipes. The other three layers are beginning to be added to the work. Was your starting point the tree or the pipe?

RP: In the beginning, there was the pipe. (*laughter*)

TW: I always find Mondrian's work most thrilling when he takes a landscape painting and begins to organize it into something that's less literal and more abstract. While the abstractions are best known, it's the in-between works, the ones searching in a middle state, which thrill. Later he goes back again to nature. I'm curious as to whether you think about your work in relationship to either your history, the history of the tree/pipe situation, and/or the history of other artists' work.

RP: I do think of Mondrian, particularly when the tree is in the process of becoming abstract. There is that wonderful progression in his work from the earlier trees that are very pictorial and refract more and more until, in the end, they are only comprised of black lines and primary colors.

TW: Do you worry about your work becoming like Mondrian's, so perfect that it could, in a way, trap you?

RP: Yeah, that's always a fear, but I'm always seeking to avoid the traps or endgames that might be lurking. That's part of keeping work vital; you have to pay attention to when you might be heading down the endgame road. With the *Dendroids* series you can see how it has evolved in the past few years: I have been seeking to expand the edges of the language, and send the work outward into those edges. Essentially, I am establishing the rules of a language, only to then break those rules. The most recent *Dendroids* are the *Maelstrom* piece and then its complete opposite, the *100 Foot Line*, which is basically an isolated

Head Cheese Slices, 2004,
pigmented cast epoxy resin,
polyester fiber fill, 19 × 21 × 26
inches. Photo: William Lytch.

trunk growing upward—just one single strand becoming narrower and narrower.

TW: Oh, that's wonderful; I don't know the piece.

RP: It's in model form, actually.

TW: It's like an endless-column deal?

RP: It's an endless, much more organic and tapering column.

TW: It's a phallus, a column, a tree! A lot of different states, but I want to go back to what you were just saying. What are some of the little areas in your work that were of interest to you but which—

RP: Felt like endgames?

TW: Precisely.

RP: Well, some people misinterpret some of my work as a kind of endgame; for instance, the machines. People seemed to think that with the *Painting Manufacture Unit* I was making a comment about painting; that I was claiming that a mechanized process could replace painters. They thought I was just having an incestuous dialogue about the art world.

TW: Have you heard this about the machine or the product, or both? I have a different take on it.

RP: It's the machine *and* the product.

TW: You seem to say that criticism stings, so what the hell are you going to do about it? Do you think it's their problem, or has this actually become *your* problem now?

RP: It's not my problem; I'm just giving you an example of people thinking there is an endgame where it may not exist.

TW: Are you making more machines?

RP: The last machine was the *Erosion Machine*. Each piece's complexity illuminates aspects of the previous machines that people may not have thought about before. Obviously the *Erosion Machine* brings erosion and geologic processes to the front and center—once you see that, you see the geologic references in the *Paint Dipper* paintings or the *PMU* paintings. This veers away from the art world talking about itself, which I'm not at all interested in.

TW: I'm curious as to whether the product should actually be separated from the machine.

RP: It's important to me that when taken apart from the

machine, the paintings, or the products, as you say, be compelling, so that even if you had no knowledge of how they were made, they'd still be fascinating objects. That being said, knowing how they were made enriches the objects, although this shouldn't be the main thing that's interesting about them.

TW: You said you're not interested in the art world and I'm wondering whether there are any living artists whose work you really admire, and whose work and minds you do engage?

RP: Tom Friedman is an amazing artist. And Chris Burden is, of course, someone who's always been very important to me. Both of them are people who take a kernel of logic and then build and build upon that until they have something that's insanely beautiful and complex. Also, one of my favorite painters is Sigmar Polke.

TW: I come back to this issue of labor and your work's laborious quality. Now you have assistants, but in the past you had an enormous commitment to realizing the work by yourself. Is it important for an artist to work that way, and do those three artists you mention work in the same way? The question is: Is this an ethical journey you can't escape?

RP: Processes and materiality can only be discovered and brought out by intense time spent just engaged on a given project. If you are a purely fabricating artist, you can tell who gets things fabricated: something is always missing. I can tell right away what these artists' relationships to their materials are. I understand that for some people that removal from the fabricating process is part of their conceptual framework—

TW: Like Sol LeWitt, perhaps.

RP: Yeah; I can respect his work but I may not ever be able to really love it.

BT: The same is true in architecture. There are architects who have an idea, an image, and don't really need to know how to implement them. To some extent, that architecture has been considered more avant-garde. There is a distance, not irony exactly, which is admired because the architect is not actually dealing with how things get put together, or, a lot of times, even issues of habitation.

TW: Thinking, "Okay, we no longer need that intense labor to produce things; we can have machines do it!" was a by-product of the machine age. Clearly you are working within that concern, Roxy, and we are, too, because our work isn't entirely hand built. Though we *believe* in the commitment of the human to the process, and we don't like it when it's not

THE PIECE'S BEAUTY IS NOT MY NUMBER ONE PRIORITY. THAT'S JUST A BY-PRODUCT. FOR ME, SOMETHING IS BEAUTIFUL WHEN IT EMBODIES AN ENORMOUS COMPLEXITY IN A SEAMLESS WHOLE.



Interim, 2003, stainless steel,
35 feet high.

present in the work.

RP: I get the feeling that a lot of your work comes out of a direct engagement with materials.

BT: With pipes. *(laughter)* This is a relatively isolated place. Is isolation important to how you work? I know you have a place in Brooklyn, but according to Sofia, your wife, you spend about 80 percent of your time here.

RP: For me it's a practical reality: to do work at this scale I have to be in a place where there's a lot of room. Even in that giant Red Hook studio, where we first met in 2001, there'd be no way I could do a piece of this scale.

BT: But what about isolation from other people?

RP: It's difficult to work up here for extended periods. Granted, there are some aspects of that isolation that may have positive contributions to the work, such as the ability to work undisturbed, but for the most part, it's a practical necessity. Also, quite frankly, it's a noisy process. When we're going full steam, there may be five grinders going and someone may be wailing with a sledgehammer on a piece of pipe to get it to fit. It's a cacophony, an enormous din.

Actually, the *concept* of isolation and extraction is an important one. That's one of the ideas that epitomizes at least the past 150 years of humankind: the constant desire to break things down into their component parts, in a chemical and conceptual sense. I think of my work in terms of this idea of fractionation: a process in chemistry where you take a compound, and through the introduction of one or more compounds or solvents, you break it up into its component constituents. I would like my work to resonate with this as well: an idea of taking this organic entity, in this case a tree, and breaking it down into its components.

TW: I don't see it; it seems to me that you are building things up continuously rather than breaking them down.

RP: Well, fractionation is the first step. You have the component parts, and then you can recombine them into new compounds.

TW: So the fractionation is not an end in itself.

RP: No, it's the first step. I would like my work to examine this drive that humans have to constantly break things down into their component parts and isolate them further and further. This gets us into a lot of trouble as a species. It can benefit us—medically, for instance—but it's also dangerous. Think of heroin, for instance, which is the extraction of the most potent alkaloids in morphine, which, in turn, is the extraction of the most potent

parts of opium. The process increases the possibility of addiction exponentially.

It's just kept accelerating in the past couple hundred years. We started out being concerned with things that moved so we could hunt and eat, and then slowly we began to understand that matter is composed of molecules; molecules are composed of atoms; atoms are composed of neutrons, protons and electrons; and now we have found that neutrons and protons are composed of quarks; and soon I'm quite sure we will find that quarks are composed of something else.

TW: It's absolutely clear in your work that it's not just about the individual trees but it's also about the forest.

RP: I have a desire to constantly to break things down in a critical way. I'm trying to examine it: why do we need to constantly break things down into component parts?

TW: Because you are afraid of the romantic. Because this is the way by which you basically say, I'm afraid of the real and raw power that is in me as an artist and I will criticize it, and chop it up into tiny little pieces, until I've run it through my whole fucking system, until I can't stand it any more, and then I'm permitted to regurgitate, and re-assimilate.

RP: I guess my trying to understand it is an attempt to control it, in a way.

TW: I see a problem for you ahead; I always only see problems ahead. Once you've built up this shop and you have some people that help you weld and construct stuff, it might be hard to deconstruct the machine. I mean, you've started a machine out here that happens to have humans behind it. How are you going to get back to the really small investigations that can be done by you alone? One way might be to crosscut what you are doing well with that which you don't do well.

RP: Force myself to do things I don't do well . . .

TW: This is not basically a good career builder, but it's good for life: I sometimes take on things that I'm not capable of, and work in ways with which I don't feel comfortable.

RP: Going back to the forest metaphor, to burn it down so that you nourish the soil. Yeah, it's takes tremendous courage to do things you don't do well. I feel like I have to analyze everything and run it through so many filters and processes before I actually let it out into the world.

TW: I'm curious, Roxy, about whether you actually have the ambition to make architecture. Your work



has inherent architectural possibilities as it moves into three-dimensional, physical structures not only capable of supporting themselves but also other things and people passing through.

RP: I see them, yes, but there are certain aspects that steer me away from architecture. For instance, how intensely collaborative it has to be; how intensely you have to work with so many different entities to make things happen. That's always frightening.

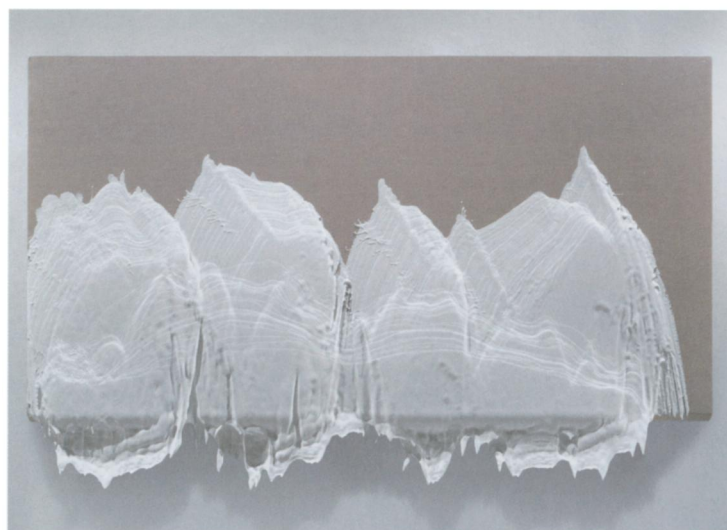
TW: But you are dipping into that world more and more. You dipped into it with your life partnership with Sofia, an architect, and the studio you built together, and you're doing it now in your public work.

Elements of your work easily translate into something that has architectural meaning. There's a structural element that is like a disordered tetrahedron, or a newly ordered tetrahedron, and also that singular tree tower, the singular upright trunk.

RP: I've thought a little bit about this; perhaps you have some thoughts on it too. In the past there have been artists who have made architecture—Leonardo, Michelangelo, Piranesi. Don't you think that it's much harder these days, with so many layers of bureaucracy and regulations?

TW: Many architects today are obvious in looking at art as a source of inspiration. A lot of artists look toward architects for inspiration too, however the two practices are inherently very different. I regard architecture as a service, though when it is done sublimely it becomes an art. Generally it's not about the issue of form at all; form is the weakest portion of architecture, although it's the most celebrated.

BT: It's hard for an artist to accept compromise. Coming from architecture, it's not that we assume compromise, but we accept that our practice has a



boundary that's not defined by us. Having studied art as an undergraduate, and then having gone to architecture school later, I actually like the boundary because I felt so lost in space studying art. You have to chart your own direction as an artist.

RP: Yeah, though I impose a lot of constraints on myself. The problem develops when the constraints that come from without overwhelm the constraints that come from within. When dealing with a large and complex institution, for example, whose structures can be surprisingly nebulous. You never know when some level of the bureaucracy will suddenly decide that they have jurisdiction over your project.

You just have to chart your own way within those constraints. I like finding what variations are possible within a given set of restrictions—there are infinite ways you can go within them.

BT: But it's not the universe.

RP: Yes, it's not the universe. *(laughter)*

TW: You clearly like these self-imposed restraints. You thrive on them.

☐ Watch a video of Roxy Paine discussing his stainless-steel tree sculptures at BOMBsite.com.

left and right: *PMU (Painting Manufacture Unit)* and *PMU no. 18*, 1999–2000, aluminum, stainless steel, computer, electronics, relays, custom

software, acrylic, servo motors, valves, pump, precision track, glass, rubber, 110 × 157 × 176 inches. Photo: John Lamka.