



REVIEW - 05 JUL 2017

Inga Svala Thórsdóttir and Wu Shanzhuan

Long March Space, Beijing, China

BY COLIN SIYUAN CHINNERY

The glacier-topped volcanic mountain of Snæfellsjökull in Iceland is famous for providing the entry point through which the protagonists of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) descend into the world's bowels. 'CAUSE AND EXAMPLES PROJECTED FROM IT' – an exhibition consisting primarily of architectural designs and models – documents Inga Svala Thórsdóttir and Wu Shanzhuan's plans to build a library at the site. Snæfellsjökull's renown as the location of a fictional event, however, makes their eccentric project seem more of a conceptual mechanism than a genuine proposal.

Thórsdóttir and Wu have been collaborating as artists since 1991. One of their earliest works, *Perfect Brackets* (1992), takes the form of two overlapping parentheses. This pseudo-equation creates a punctuation dilemma: brackets need to contain text to be meaningful but Thórsdóttir and Wu have devised a symbol that, by negating its own logical function, assumes new meaning within an absurdist ontology. From this motif, the artists have developed two other structures: *Kuo Xuan* (2010), in which a spiral is

repeatedly bisected to create a series of ever-enlarging *Perfect Brackets*, and *Little Fat Flesh* (2011), a shape made from the combination of a square, a circle and the intersections of *Perfect Brackets*.



Inga Svala Thorsdottir & Wu Shanzhuan, *Bird before Peace*, 1993, cibachrome CB, 46 x 64 cm. Courtesy: Long March Space, Beijing; photograph: Thomas Fuesser

At Long March Space, a series of architectural sketches (*About Cause*, 2017) lines the gallery space, elucidating how various architectural objects featured in the show were developed from these basic forms. These drafts are annotated with the artists' distinctive and inscrutable text, which usually combines invented words, idiosyncratic aphorisms and a highly stylized form of pseudo-logic that has evolved alongside their practice over many years. It helps to be familiar with their linguistic constructions: for example, a 2013 manuscript describes *Perfect Brackets* as 'a constitution', *Kuo Xuan* as 'self-rotation' and 'self-recovery', and *Little Fat Flesh* as 'the "real itself"'.





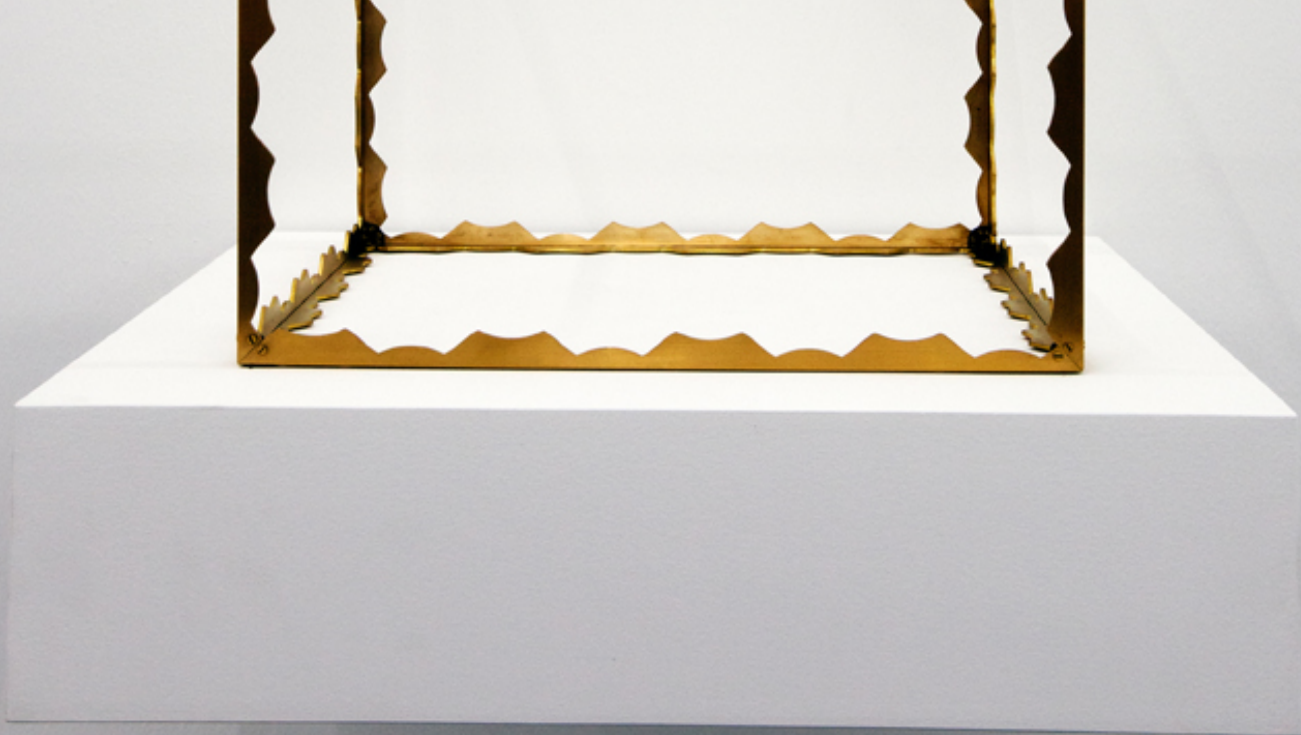
Inga Svala Thorsdottir & Wu Shanzhuan, *Arch*, 2017, white ash wood with matte varnish, artwork: 327 x 176 x 152 cm, plinth: 25 x 209 x 240 cm. Courtesy: Long March Space, Beijing; photograph: Thomas Fuesser

Alongside the drafts and sketches are 'floorboards' made from seven different kinds of wood, intersecting the *Little Fat Flesh* pattern in hypnotic repetition (*Seven in One*, all works 2017 unless otherwise stated). Elsewhere, *Perfect Brackets* are used for the black iron balusters of hand railings (*Enclosure*) and also for the cross-section shape of *Bracket Board* and *Beam*. Other architectural details include three doorway arches that are attached to one another (*Arch*), a thick pillar (*Column the Eighteenth the Perfect Brackets*), a large bookshelf (*Shelf*) and two approximations of a structure for the planned 'CAUSE' (the Snæfellsjökull library): *Cause in Perspective* and *Cause in Projection*.



<<https://frieze.com/event/art-architecture-conference>>





Inga Svala Thorsdottir & Wu Shanzhuan, *Perimeter Hollowed*, 2017, brass, 34 x 34 x 34 cm (artwork), 13 x 48 x 48 cm (plinth). Courtesy: Long March Space, Beijing; photograph: Thomas Fuesser

At the far end of the gallery, forming a backdrop to the whole installation, are two works: *Unidentified Objects* (1992–99) and *Mirror* (1993). The former consists of small, random components amassed from everyday items; the latter is a pulverized mirror: a functional object reduced to its basic matter. Both works are related to an early series by Thórsdóttir and Wu, 'Thing's Right(s)' (1995), which proposed extending the concept of human rights to objects. Included here, these early works suggest the independence of – and equality between – the component elements of the artists' proposed library. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to understand Thórsdóttir and Wu's library as a form of utopia, made from and populated with 'things with rights'. As Iceland is one of the Earth's youngest landmasses (as well as being Inga Svala Thórsdóttir's home country), it is perhaps a suitable location for this thought experiment – a mythical library waiting for Verne's protagonists to return from the void.

Main image: Inga Svala Thorsdottir & Wu Shanzhuan, *Enclosure*, 2017, black iron, red oak with matte varnish black iron adapting piece, 116 x 112 x 8 cm (artwork), 97 x 156 x 72 cm (plinth). Courtesy: Long March Space, Beijing; photograph: Thomas Fuesser



WU SHANZHUAN & INGA SVALA THORSDDOTTIR

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