

PublicWorks



Ursula von Rydingsvard *SCIENTIA*, 2016

A gift of Lore Harp McGovern

McGovern Institute for Brain Research at MIT
Building 46





Ursula von Rydingsvard's *SCIENTIA*

Patricia C. Phillips

The studio of Ursula von Rydingsvard is a constant hum of activity and inquiry. Each new work continues and confirms a depth and persistence of process—and presents new directions and challenges. Paradoxically both tempestuous and contemplative, the artist, clothed in protective gear, quietly draws exquisite wandering lines on pieces of cedar that are assembled to make evocative forms whose exposed surfaces are scored and lacerated in a cacophony of the screeching blades of circular saws. Each new work builds on its precedents, yet reveals in its process of becoming an enduring commitment to emergent and often difficult new ideas and directions. Often beginning with the conformities of milled, “ready-made” cedar beams, new and unprecedented variables are coordinated in a wildly persistent yet inherently searching process. Her unconventional methodology was not taught and has been discovered and honed through a deep, intuitive intelligence formed through experience, observation, repetition, inquiry, and concentration.

Von Rydingsvard’s work has a distinctive and energetic form yet a constitutively enigmatic, often unrevealed character. It is formally and conceptually complex, neither overtly joyous nor filled with darkness or despair. It exists ambiguously yet forcefully between abstraction and representation with registers that often prompt nuanced, unsettled, and open response. The artist’s prolific and adaptive public work has been sited, either permanently or temporarily, in sculpture parks, urban plazas, and other spaces, but it is installations of her work on college and university campuses that stimulate particularly

associative and contextual readings and experiences. The work engenders an expressive dialogue with its local and expanded environments of structures of and passions for knowledge and inquiry.

She recently installed a major new work, *Uroda* (2015), made of thousands of copper elements in front of the Andlinger Center for Energy and the Environment at Princeton University. In time, the copper will age, oxidize, and acquire new and vivid colors in response to water and weather at the site. And now at MIT, one of the first universities to establish an ambitious public art program for its remarkable confederation of researchers, teachers, and students, she has installed the bronze sculpture *SCIENTIA* (2016) in front of the McGovern Institute for Brain Research.

Born in 1942 in Deensen, Germany, von Rydingsvard is the fifth of seven children of a Polish mother and Ukrainian father. As a young child enduring the deprivations of World War II, the defeat of Germany and the end of ghastly conflict did not offer respite or relief. Her family became part of a wandering tumult of displaced Poles moving from one refugee camp to another between 1945 and 1950 in post-war Germany. With early childhood memories sealed in her consciousness and somatic recall, over many years as a New York City-based artist she has developed a courageous sensibility for the unknowns of material experimentation and extraordinary applications. But even new works of bronze, polyurethane resin, or copper generally emanate from her deep attraction to wood and legendary use of pliable cedar as a point of origin.

There is a traceable line between her vivid memories of being uprooted and homeless—and her evocative use of wood. In postwar refugee camps she sought security in provisional wooden barracks rapidly assembled to provide rudimentary forms of shelter for displaced people. She pressed her body against the wooden walls feeling the protective textures while inhaling the smell of the wood. In conditions of extremity, the wood offered a vital, renewing animism to a bewildered and frightened young child. A descendant of Polish farmers, perhaps these experiences also summoned images of enormous wood piles, homes and tools made of wood that are an enduring source of ideas and inspiration for the artist.

In 1950, the artist's family boarded a ship in Bremerhaven, Germany that sailed to the United States and they eventually settled in Plainville, Connecticut. Von Rydingsvard attended public school and assisted her parents with the work and maintenance of the family. She recalls discovering art and imagined what it would be like to be an artist, yet never believed that this could be possible. In college in Florida she studied art education and taught in public schools for nine years in different locations. Ultimately she abandoned the securities of teaching and employment to move to New York with her three-year-old daughter. She found a small loft on Spring Street, which she purchased with her life savings from school teaching, raised her daughter, often subsisted on food stamps and odd jobs, and pursued a Master of Fine Arts at Columbia University. As a sculpture student she spent most of her time welding, but near the conclusion of her program she was introduced to milled cedar—four inch by four inch by eight feet lengths—whose responsive vascular structure has animated her artistic practice for forty years.

It is not surprising that early life encounters of displacement and poverty have annealed a constitutive resourcefulness and her legendary work ethic. Although she often draws and makes small objects that present themselves equivocally yet stoically as eccentric, functionally ambivalent tools and artifacts, the epicenter of the work is large-scale cedar sculptures (which are often the original and first generation of monumental works of bronze, copper, and other materials) assembled and stacked into thick forms that are cut, sliced, and agitated with circular saws operated by studio assistants known as "cutters." Like the laboratory of a scientist engaged in collaborative research and experiments, von Rydingsvard's studio has a small, loyal family of assistants who work with her to navigate technical and conceptual questions and enter the unknowns and uncertainties presented by each new work. With the artist, they are a dedicated community who help to advance often challenging aesthetic experiments. Yet there is genuine conviviality in the demanding work; no matter how pressing the deadline or daunting the task, each day they all break for a shared lunch at the rough wooden table in the studio's small kitchen, often including guests who may be visiting.

The McGovern Institute for Brain Research at MIT is an intellectual hub for scientists, researchers, faculty members, fellows, and students who seek to understand the intricate workings of the human brain and then apply these insights to potential prevention and treatment of brain disorders experienced by people of all ages. Established as a collaborative environment, the expectation is that research is both entrepreneurial and instrumental. Dedicated and driven, they embrace theory with insight that leads to real consequences for patients and their families.

Von Rydingsvard's work for the McGovern Institute is a striking and compelling embodiment of the intricacy of aesthetic form as metaphor or surrogate for the cellular and visceral, electrical and

chemical infrastructure of the human brain. Functioning like the cranial cavity that protects the brain, von Rydingsvard frequently utilizes and continues to push to its limits typology, forms, technology, and meaning in the inner spaces of enormous vessels or bowls that contain, protect, and mysteriously withhold. The genesis of *SCIENTIA* is a narrow base and foundation constructed of cedar elements that have been assembled, cut, and incised to create a gradually and gracefully opening and unfolding vessel that leads to a dramatic summit—a magnificent, lace-like bronze crown. The expansive work is 25 feet tall (and the artist's largest work to date.) First a full-scale cedar sculpture, once completed in the artist's Brooklyn studio, it was shipped to Polich Tallix Foundry in Rock Tavern, New York to be cast in bronze. Yet its ultimate embellishment of five feet of an open, lattice-like bronze crown was developed through drawings and refinements by the artist and her own work on wax molds for this fantastic cast element.



In front of the triangular building, *SCIENTIA* bears witness to the mission of the McGovern. Its active, agitated, irrepressible beauty embodies the despair of illness and loss with the expectancy of medical innovation and scientific research. Emanating from the surfaces of the textured, dense, thick, labored, and detailed base of the vessel is a culminating radical dematerialization of form that might elicit the neural pathways of cognitive thought or materialized representation of the ways that both personal and more panoramic memories develop—and are preserved or perhaps slowly wither away through the vagaries of illness or age.

This is not to suggest that *SCIENTIA* “illustrates” the mission and work of the McGovern Institute but that its presence is a stimulus for considerations of the ways that thought and knowledge are

For over 30 years **Ursula von Rydingsvard** (b. Deensen, Germany) has been making monumental sculptures that reveal the trace of the human hand and resemble objects and environments that echo the artist’s family heritage in pre-industrial Poland. The artist’s childhood was marked by the strain of living in eight different refugee camps over the course of five years; her earliest recollections—of displacement and subsistence through humble means—infuse her work with emotional potency. Von Rydingsvard has built towering cedar structures, creating intricate networks of individual beams, shaped by sharp and lyrical cuts and fused together to form rich, dynamic surfaces. While abstract at its core, von Rydingsvard’s work takes visual cues from the landscape, the human body, and utilitarian objects—such as the artist’s collection of household vessels—and demonstrates an interest in the point where the man-made meets nature.

Von Rydingsvard has received many awards, including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Sculpture Center (2014); the Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture (2011); membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2008); fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation (1983) and the National Endowment for the Arts (1979, 1986); and exhibition prizes from the International Association of Art Critics (1992, 2000, 2011). Major exhibitions include the 56th Venice Biennale, Venice (2015); Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton, UK (2014); Sculpture Center, Queens,

About Public Art at MIT: MIT’s Percent-for-Art program allots funds to commission or purchase art of each new major renovation or building project. The program was formally instituted in 1968, but earlier collaborations between artists and architects can be found on the Institute’s campus. When architect Eero Saarinen designed the MIT Chapel in 1955, sculptor Theodore Roszak designed the bell tower and sculptor Harry Bertioia designed the altar screen.

In 1985 architect I.M. Pei and artists Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischner collaborated on a Percent-for-Art program for the Wiesner Building, home to MIT’s List Visual Arts Center and Media Lab. Other Percent-for-Art works have been commissioned or purchased from such artists as Mark di Suvero, Jackie Ferrara, Dan Graham, Cai Guo-Qiang, Candida Höfer, Anish Kapoor, Sol LeWitt,

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formed, experienced, and shared, as well as some of the affinities, speculations, and contingencies of the creative process and scientific methods of discovery. Both science and art require intrepid navigations of the unknown and unimagined.

Art is a genuine and generous, if often challenging invitation to dwell with its forms and ideas through our own restive processes of conviction and doubt. The creations of von Rydingsvard are agents of inquiry that dynamically and dialectically present and withhold meaning. It is within the liminal spaces of mystery and possibility that we encounter the palpable bonds of different forms of knowledge—and a deep desire of discovery—as indicative features of the human experience.

New York (2011); Madison Square Park, New York (2006); and Storm King Art Center (1992). Her works are in the permanent collections of numerous museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, the National Gallery of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Walker Art Center, and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Von Rydingsvard lives and works in New York. She received an MFA from Columbia University (1975) and was an Assistant Professor at Yale University (1982-1986).

Patricia C. Phillips is the author of *Ursula von Rydingsvard: Working* (New York: Prestel, 2011), *It is Difficult*, a survey of the work of Alfredo Jaar (Barcelona: Actar Press, 1998), and lead author of *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art* (New York: Prestel, 2016). Her curatorial and design projects include *Disney Animators and Animation* (Whitney Museum of Art, 1981), *The POP Project* (Institute for Contemporary Art/P.S. 1, 1988), *Making Sense: Five Installations on Sensation* (Katonah Museum of Art, 1996), *City Speculations* (Queens Museum, 1995-96) and editor of *City Speculations* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), and *Retail Value* (Dorsky Curatorial Projects, 2008). From 2002-2007, she was Editor-in-Chief of *Art Journal*, a peer-reviewed quarterly on modern art published by the College Art Association. She is Academic Dean of Moore College of Art & Design in Philadelphia.

Louise Nevelson, Jorge Pardo, Matthew Ritchie, Sarah Sze, and Leo Villareal.

SCIENTIA is a gift of Lore Harp McGovern for the McGovern Institute for Brain Research at MIT. The McGovern Institute for Brain Research at MIT is led by a team of world-renowned neuroscientists who are pushing the frontiers of technology to understand how the brain learns, perceives, and understands the world, and how these functions are disrupted by disease. The Institute was established in 2000 by Lore Harp McGovern and the late Patrick J. McGovern, with the goal of improving human welfare, communication and understanding through their support for neuroscience research. The director is Robert Desimone, formerly the head of intramural research at the National Institute of Mental Health.

ALL IMAGES:

Ursula von Rydingsvard, *SCIENTIA*, 2016

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