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# Thing Theories

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA TALKS WITH SARAH SZE ABOUT "TRIPLE POINT," 2013, HER PROJECT FOR THE UNITED STATES PAVILION AT THE 55TH VENICE BIENNALE

**RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA:** What was your starting point when you began thinking about making something in the US pavilion? Were you engaged with the space itself or the history of the place?

**SARAH SZE:** I'd say both. The pavilion, which is from 1930, is loosely based on a small Palladian villa. You walk in and there's the rotunda with its two symmetrical wings. There's a whole hierarchy around space in this Palladian idea, and I was immediately intrigued by how I might change that hierarchy. The pavilion is also a funny space, circulationwise, because when you walk in you usually have to choose whether to go left or right, and then you have to double back on yourself. This time, the front door won't be used: I'm making one of the emergency exits into the entrance.

**RT:** So you are creating a very clear narrative in terms of how people walk through the space?

**SS:** Yes, exactly. The first room that you see when you enter the building slows you down. It forces you to stop. You are confronted with an iconic shape and recognize its function—it's like a planetarium—but there's

an effort and a frustration that you recognize as well. It has to do with the aspiration of modeling complex systems, and its futility. If the work in the first room has a lot of presence, then in the second room all of that dwindles down. You feel an absence. In the third room, the rotunda, you have to find the work. Instead of using it as a central space, I'm putting work in one of the closets—I'm treating it as a kind of periphery. And after that—do you remember that long wall of windows?

**RT:** Yes.

**SS:** It's this awkward gash in the side of the building that was done in 1970. I love how they just slashed open one of the walls, going completely against the building's rigorous symmetry—it's an interesting part of its history. Afterward, the pavilion became landmarked, so you can never do anything like that again.

**RT:** How are you using this window?

**SS:** It's often been walled up, but I'm leaving it uncovered: It's a crucial part of the show. I'm thinking about the indoor space acting like an outdoor space and the outdoor space acting like an indoor space. So I'm

installing a work outdoors that climbs the front of the facade to the top of the building. It cuts diagonally and asymmetrically across the building, and it comes down through this wall of windows.

I'm trying to show the relationship between the sculpture and the building. I was thinking about the rotunda as a kind of compass, and the interior pieces refer to this as well: They ask how you might use sculpture to locate yourself within a plethora of information. I like the idea of a sculpture with the ambition to actually do something practical like that. But in many ways the works are purposefully complete failures at doing this: It's an impossible task. Like an encyclopedia, the work is out of date the minute you complete it. So the important thing is that they are remnants of that ambition rather than themselves the success of that ambition. They're all very fragile, so I hope to reflect the absurdity of the idea as well.

**"The outdoor piece has changed radically since I've been here—I've probably destroyed twenty potential sculptures so far." —Sarah Sze**

**RT:** A lot of your things are fragile; it's hard to imagine them outdoors. Did you use different materials for the piece that's outside?

**SS:** Yeah. A lot of the materials come from the garden itself—rocks, moss, plants, wood, not to mention water and wind. There's a huge tree in the courtyard that also becomes part of the work. These elements are combined with materials designed to be waterproof and weatherproof: rocks made of Tyvek, photos printed on Tyvek, rope, clamps, buckets, packaging, plastic survival gear, aluminum tools.

**RT:** Where did you find these materials? Were you in Venice looking around the boat shops and hardware stores?

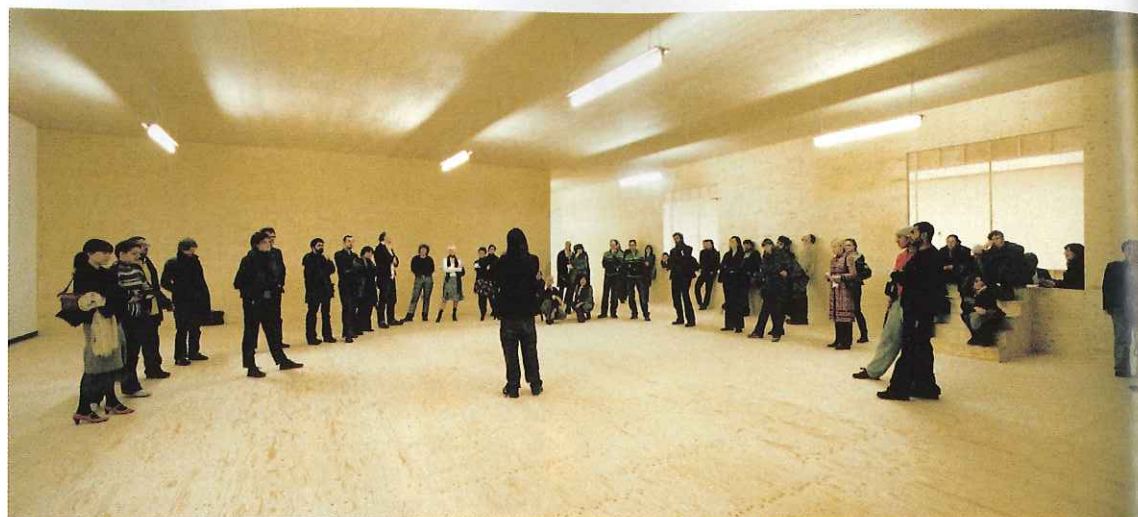
**SS:** Yes, we've been collecting things throughout Venice, and it's interesting what you can and can't get. I'm using a lot of rocks and stones for the show, and you cannot get big, natural rocks in Venice, because they simply don't exist. Every stone brought here has been used to build something. So there are no boulders, but in terms of boat and naval equipment, it's a complete haven.

**RT:** In a way, then, you're using a lot of readymades.

**SS:** Yes, combined with the handmade. But I think less about the division between handmade and readymade than about signaling a kind of behavior, which is why I use certain materials and leave the traces of the process of making in them to be seen. I want people to see that the work was made in direct relation to the space, and to allow the imagination to start at the experience of making it. For the indoor works, I began with smaller sculptures and then "grew" them in the rooms themselves: I tried to remake them completely in relation to the real space. They were much easier to make than the outdoor piece, which has changed radically since I've been here—I've probably destroyed twenty potential

Installation in progress for Sarah Sze's "Triple Point," 2013, at the United States pavilion, Venice, for the 55th Venice Biennale, May 2013.





Left: Installation in progress for Sarah Sze's "Triple Point," 2013, at the United States pavilion, Venice, for the 55th Venice Biennale, May 2013.

Above: View of "Rirkrit Tiravanija: A Retrospective (Tomorrow Is Another Fine Day)," 2004, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Photo: Bob Goedewaagen.

sculptures so far. I think most artists have pieces that come together extremely quickly and works that they struggle with for what seems like forever. Neither is better: Works just have these different personalities.

**RT:** You want people to feel the process of it?

**SS:** Yes, and that the process has somehow stopped, although it could have continued. It's at that point between accruing and disintegrating, growing and dying.

**RT:** Right. I think potentiality—what isn't there but might be—could be an interesting way of showing process.

**SS:** I'm thinking about the objects as locators for time and space and behavior. And that's something I relate to when I look at objects in your work. A canoe, a wok, a table, or a silk-screen press—each has value as evidence of a potential behavior or a past use. The sculptures are really just the material parts of a much larger event that is maybe still going on. Is that the way you think of the role of objects in your work?

**RT:** Yeah. It's true that I do keep coming back to this idea of behavior. I look at how people react to or interact with things, and take account of it in making new work. A lot of it is about observation and using those observations for future ideas.

**SS:** You can see how the works function when you observe how people behave in them. I also think about building work so that the viewer becomes a figure in the piece, becomes part of it.

**RT:** When people enter into your work, or are in the same space as the work, would you say they set up another perimeter for the sculpture?

**SS:** Absolutely. It's a perimeter in constant flux, created by the interaction between the viewer and the work in real time and space. The way someone slows or speeds up or relates physically in space and to their own body as they move through a work is in many ways more important than the objects themselves, which are actu-

ally choreographed locations that get people to pause, slow down, see differently, or experience a room or a building differently. And that's what's nice about having a whole pavilion: There's a whole vocabulary that develops from each room to the next. Although people often describe their experience much more by naming what they see in front of them, I think the way the pieces are put together is all about how someone speeds up or slows down, remembers or anticipates—it's the beginning of a chain: discovering something, then recognizing the value of that discovery, then anticipating the memory of it in its absence.

**RT:** Have you ever filmed people looking at your work, to document how they move within it?

**SS:** I do film people in my work sometimes, and it is interesting, but I think my work is more about the internal experience. I'm interested in how you create a kind of intimacy in a public space, and in teetering between interior and exterior at the same time. The title for the whole show, "Triple Point," refers to the situation where all three states of a substance—gas, liquid, and solid—can exist at once. So it's this teetering between states, the fragility of equilibrium, and the constant desire to create stability and a sense of place that frame the narrative. Are you familiar with Butoh dance?

**RT:** Yes.

**SS:** So [the Japanese dancer and choreographer] Kazuo Ohno talked about the idea of there being three spaces in the world—each of which is equally weighted. First, there is the space of the skin. Second, there is the space under the skin, and third, the space outside the skin. I loved this idea that the skin is itself a transitional space that occupies one-third of the world. I hope that the sculptures are in some ways like that. The movement of the body in physical space and the transitions produced through shifts in scale are both important, but I think

that what's happening on the inside is just as important, if not more—and that's very hard to document.

**RT:** I did a retrospective with just empty rooms [at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2004–2005)], so I really thought a lot about how one interiorizes what one sees. A docent would take you around and describe objects you were supposed to be looking at as if they were there. So what you imagined was a lot about personal memory and experience, and everyone came away with a different image of the show.

**SS:** It was a beautiful idea. You took the object out entirely. It's funny that where I'm starting from is almost the opposite: hoping to offer so much information that one person's description of a work, and even the way their eyes move in it, is inevitably entirely different; it can never be navigated visually in the same way. But you can also put nothing in, and still the same is true.

**RT:** Yes, that's right. For me, the experience of your work is that I don't remember the bigger structure and probably wouldn't even be able to describe it, but I remember many smaller individual moments. I find I often focus on a particular part, in which I take great interest.

**SS:** It reminds me of when we were at a show of mine in New York. We were standing in front of a very large work, *The Uncountables (Encyclopedia)* [2010], and I remember that you said, "I like the cup for the matches at the bottom." What seems totally insignificant can actually be the most important thing. I think often, even when people have the most dramatic experiences, what they remember are the most mundane things, like the smell of a room or what they ate the day someone died. □

RIRKRIT TIRAVANAJA IS AN ARTIST BASED IN NEW YORK, BERLIN, AND CHIANG MAI, THAILAND.

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