



# Richard Nonas and a Rock Concert in Maspeth

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | MAY 22, 2014



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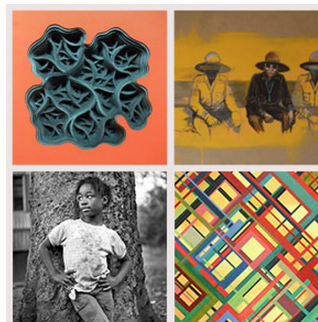
An installation photo of Richard Nonas and Joel Shapiro's "Cross-Cuts" at the Knockdown Center. (Photo by Richard Nonas, 2014)



Richard Nonas. Photo by Scott Indrisek

**Richard Nonas** is an anomaly. Until the age of 30, he didn't think of himself as a practicing artist in any sense — he was a fledgling anthropologist, pondering the way Indians in Northern Mexico conceptualize space in the desert. But after abandoning his original career path, Nonas has pursued an art practice with vigor for more than four decades, creating subtle sculptures of wood and metal. Alanna Heiss included him in P.S.1's debut show, along with Richard Serra and Walter De Maria. Heiss, recently tapped to curate an exhibition at the **Knockdown Center** in Maspeth, Queens, chose to pair Nonas with **Joel Shapiro**, the artist who inaugurated her now-defunct Clocktower Gallery.

For Knockdown Center, Nonas had to ponder a unique challenge: The venue — a beautifully renovated but still raw former factory — hosts art exhibitions as well as concerts, with capacity for 5,000 spectators. "How do you deal with that?" he said in an interview with ARTINFO earlier this week. "Either you take the sculpture away each time and then put it back after the performance, or you make work that can't hurt, or be hurt by, people. I thought it would be interesting to make something that could stand up to a hip-hop concert with 5,000 people moving through and around and even on it. Instead of a problem, the situation becomes an interesting spatial and sculptural challenge."



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The piece in question is “Slant 1,” a minimalist parade of paired rock clusters. City inspectors came through and blessed the safety of the installation, only to return




just before a major M.I.A. performance to say that the work would need to be temporarily moved before the concert. While Nonas’s original plan — to integrate the sculpture as a quasi-interactive component to live performance — didn’t come to fruition, “Slant 1,” in a less-populated context, has a quiet, imposing beauty within Knockdown Center’s massive square footage. The rocks themselves “grew there, hid there, belonged there,” Nonas noted, since at least half of them were sourced on the site itself, when the surrounding property was being dug up to create a parking lot area. While Nonas said he’s made similar sculptures before, they’ve always been for outdoor pieces — like a recent permanent commission in Burgundy, France — and he’d considered it “too arty” to place them

indoors. “But this space is so weird, so big, and so completely filled with light,” he said, “that I wanted to see, to feel, what would happen if I did pull a line of boulders diagonally through the room, cutting the corner of just where the stage would be for those large concerts.”

The installation divides the center space of Knockdown Center, with comparatively miniscule iron and bronze works by Joel Shapiro nearby. “Joel’s earliest work was about scale — the tension and power of small pieces in large spaces; a body of work I have always very much liked,” Nonas said. “So I was pleased that he proposed to deal with the Knockdown space in that way now. I was dealing with scale too, but in an almost opposite way, and the spatial relationships between our work became, in my mind, another element of what I was trying to do. What I wanted was the ambiguous emotional intensity of a place that seemed to me neither inside nor out, not quite urban but not rural either. An undefined, even undefinable, unfinished place, but an almost perfect one.”

Nonas is deeply invested in the setting of his works; he said that when a collector purchases a piece, he often suggests going personally to their home in order to assist with placement and hanging. “I’m more interested in the place that these objects make than I am in the objects themselves,” he said. “The objects are tools. The stones are tools. The line is a tool. But the place the line makes is not. And the change the place makes in you is not. The possibility of shifting change is what interests me; the strange, vibrating physical presence you cannot quite name, the confusing place that the room itself can come to be — with or without the 5,000 people moving through it.” Gallery settings provide equal opportunities and complexities — right now Nonas is looking ahead to a solo show at McAffrey Fine Art’s new bi-level space in Chelsea, scheduled for September. “Each gallery is a unique space; a place for me to skew. ‘Skew’ is an interesting word — a slightly subversive one with both temporal and spatial implications.”

At Knockdown Center, Nonas also has a wooden wall sculpture on view, titled “Slant 2.” The work comprises arrangements of simple, unadorned pieces of oak arrayed in a line. “I don’t use exotic materials. I want no mystery of detail. I want everything clear and ordinary — except the final result,” he said, summarizing his method in general. “I want the materials to be familiar. I want you to know what they are and how they feel. I want you to already know that that wood is rough to the touch, and slightly absorbent, that steel is colder and harder. I want only known, only identifiable forms. I want no mystery, no luxury, no strangeness. Except in the result — which must be confusing, ambiguous, edgy. And finally unidentifiable.”

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