

Constantin Brancusi,
Endless Column,
1937. Cast iron, 96¼
ft. high.

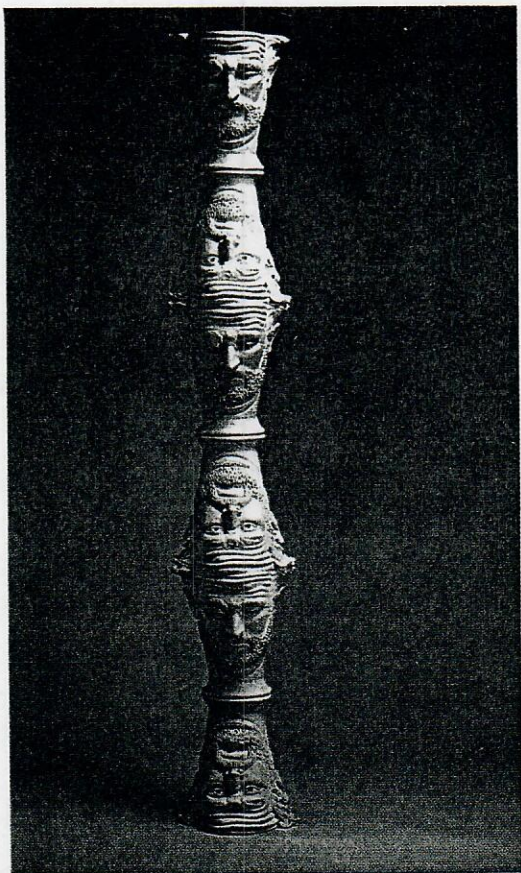
Endless Columns: The Quest for Infinite Extension

Suzaan Boettger

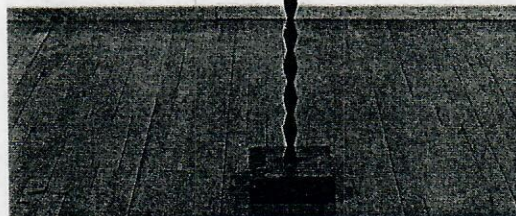
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The number of sculptural pillars across time and space suggests that the motif is elemental, yet its connotations are far from elementary. Like Jack and the mythic beanstalk, 20th-century sculptors have continually dreamt up columnar sculptures reaching toward the empyreal blue yonder. Likewise, contemporary artists have borrowed from archaic forms to create obelisks with provocative metaphors. Their vertical shafts produce associations ranging from markers of heroism to symbols of longing.

Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1937) at Tîrgu Jiu, Romania, is the modern icon of this male-dominated sculptural genre, which could also be termed "Men's Big & Tall." Its 96-foot height is truly colossal, exemplifying modern engineering's ability to overcome the constraints of gravity. Brancusi produced at least three sizes of what was titled *Column Without End* when the earliest (1918) and shortest (6½ feet) was first exhibited in New York in 1926 (it is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art). The sources of its segmented form, a shape variously described as a rhomboid, diamond or diaper pattern, have been attributed to a range of objects from serrated African carvings, to 19th-century Romanian



Far left: Robert Arneson, *I Have Eyes on Me Endlessly*, 1992. Bronze, 80 x 12 x 12 in. Courtesy John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco.



Left: Richard Pettibone, *Constantin Brancusi, 'Endless Column,' 1918-1937*, 1992. Cherry and maple, 82½ x 8½ x 8½ in. Courtesy Curt Marcus Gallery, New York.

rustic carvings (on grave stele and wooden balconies), to a textile motif of repeated lozenges perhaps from Morocco or Africa.¹ The most endless *Endless Column* is the third, at Tîrgu Jiu. Along with two other geographically aligned works there by Brancusi—a massive arch and a broad table encircled by stools—it honors the victims of that Romanian town's defense against the Germans at the River Jiu in 1916.

When the head of the Women's League of Gorj, which commissioned Brancusi's work at Tîrgu Jiu, asked him what to title the tall column, he said "...let's call it *The Endless Remembrance*." But that was his second suggestion, after he initially proposed one that seems to have puzzled her: *Stairway to Heaven*.² The two names—one sober, reflecting the work's social role as a monument, the other fanciful, evoking a desire for uplift—exemplify the two historical sources of columnar sculpture.

Brancusi's work has inspired numerous 20th-century works. Isamu Noguchi, a student of Brancusi, reveals an affinity in his *Endless Coupling* (1957), with its bony intersecting units. Rising 63 feet over the Storm King Art Center's luxuriant valley, Tal Streeter's *Endless Column* (1968) proceeds upward in a procession of thin red zigzags. The powdery shaft of Anish Kapoor's interior *Endless Column* (1992) leaves nebulous coronas as it pierces ceiling and floor. Then there are playful and conceptual homages such as Richard Pettibone's installation of

multiple, miniature *Constantin Brancusi, 'Endless Column,' 1918-1937* (1992), and Robert Arneson's *I Have Eyes on Me Endlessly* (1992), with mirror-image self-portrait heads stacked like Brancusi's rhomboid modules.

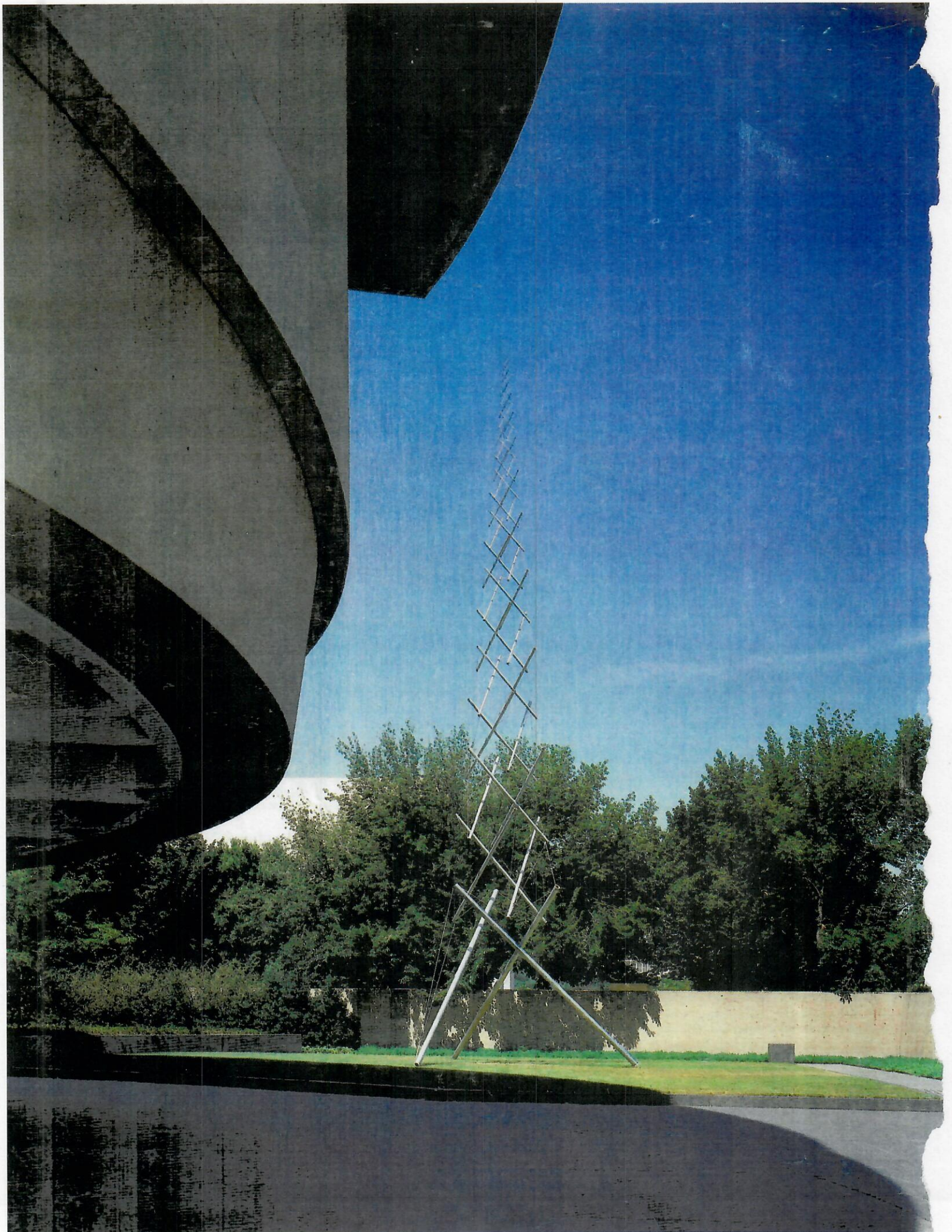
An early prototype of the single, free-standing pillar is the Egyptian obelisk, a four-sided shaft that narrows as it ascends to a pyramidal apex. New York City's Central Park contains an authentic Egyptian obelisk, the popularly nicknamed Cleopatra's Needle from around 15th century B.C. Originally erected at the Temple of Tum at Heliopolis, this obelisk performed a political function: the hieroglyphics inscribed on its 71-foot height lauds the 40 years of the reign of Thutmose III. In 1877 it served international relations when Egypt gave it to the United States upon the opening of the Suez Canal.

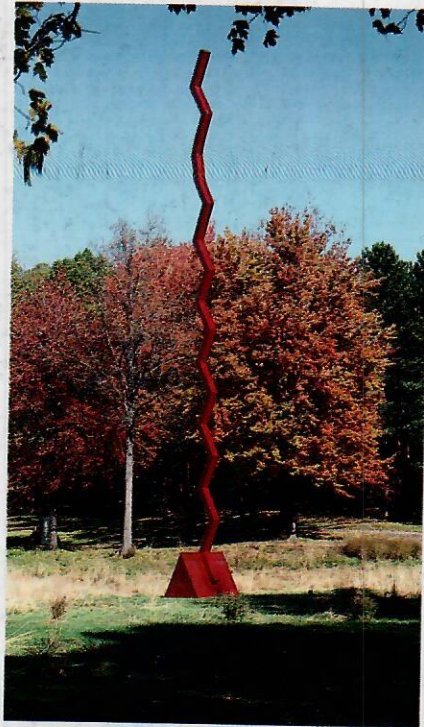
Cleopatra's Needle was installed in 1881, just a few years before the long-awaited completion in 1884 of the United States' most famous memorial obelisk, the 555-foot Washington Monument. That work's formal austerity is deceptive; it is actually more modernistically streamlined than was specified in its first—and ultimately unaffordable—neoclassical design, which included an apron arcade and figural and equine groups. In comparison, the conjunction of statue and shaft on the first Roman version of this genre, Trajan's Column (A.D. 113), demonstrates the centrality of idealized figures in antiquity. That 125-foot column commemorates Trajan's leadership in mili-

tary campaigns in Dacia (present-day Romania). A spiraling marble relief band depicts 150 episodes; a statue surmounts the epic sweep.

Yet prior to the obelisk's decorative and declarative incisions and reliefs, turning it into something of a political advertisement, its shape—a tapered soaring spire and peaked pinnacle—emphasizes vertical extension and points to its early purpose of honoring the sun god, Apollo. Religion inspired the earliest columns.

The spiritual impulse to merge with the gods, or more inclusively, the great cosmos, or primal Nature, continues to inspire columnar works in our own age. Some artists manifest this impulse through the use of "biomorphic" form corresponding to anatomical and botanical shapes in nature. Jean Arp's sinuous marbles epitomize this term; his *Growth* suggests stacked curvaceous torsos writhing beneath white spandex, or alternatively, bulbous, leafy growths in columnar form—a closeup of Jack's beanstalk. This work was produced during the period when Arp wrote essays condemning humankind's emphasis on technology and aggression and advocating feelings of affinity with nature. These marbles have been aptly described as "often echo[ing] the pulsating repetitive rhythm of contraction and expansion of Brancusi's sculpture... The angular crystalline forms of Brancusi's *Endless Column*, however, have been translated into the fluid curves of Arp's personal idiom."³





Opposite: Kenneth Snelson, *Needle Tower*, 1968. Aluminum and wire, 60 ft. high. Courtesy Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.

Left: Tal Streeter, *Endless Column*, 1968. Painted steel, 62 ft. 7 in. high. Photo: Bill Miller, courtesy Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York.

Brancusi carved the first *Endless Column* from a block of wood, and for the second, almost 24 feet tall, used a tree cut down in the garden where the *Column* was then installed, at photographer Edward Steichen's villa outside Paris. This process of cyclical return, and its lush setting, underscores the *Column* as part of

nature even while its verticality distinguishes it from the horizontality signifying the *landscape*.⁴ In cosmic symbolism, trees and columns are aligned (earliest Greek temple columns were carved from trees), as are other basic vertical objects, such as a ladder, a ship's mast, and a sacrificial stake or cross. All represent a link between sky and earth, "above" and "below." This configuration also recalls an *axis mundi*, symbolizing a central axle around which the world turns.

Most of these columnar engagements with pantheistic connection suggest a yearning for elevation—mental, spiritual—exemplifying the sublime. This yearning has been linked to a desire, "in feeling and in speech, [to] transcend the human."⁵ (We could insert "...and in sculpture and

imagery...") One route is identification with macrocosmic Nature—its scale, overwhelming power, life force—what so many columns reach up toward. In the earliest discussion of the sublime, by the Greek rhetorician Longinus (A.D. 213–73), *hypsos*, or "height," was the metaphor used for the "uplift" some art provides.

From a distance the steep incline of Kenneth Snelson's 60-foot conical *Needle Tower* (1968) suggests a rocket's upward trajectory. Recently reinstated at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, after the plaza was redesigned and landscaped, the *Tower's* juxtaposition to the Museum's cylindrical citadel emphasizes its tensile delicacy (a contrast not as pronounced in his 90-foot *Needle Tower* at the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, the Netherlands). Yet from beneath and within it, its hexagonal network of gleaming aluminum tubes between taut stainless steel wire, in an ascending, tapering, helical structure, draws one's imagination upward like smoke in a flue. The three-dimensional spiral is found in nature, from molecular structures to the sweep of galaxies. Snelson's intricately designed, cool abstraction presents a perfect primary structure. The intensity of his focus on this "universal" reveals a longing for transcendence of both the earthly body and psychological weight. Snelson's radiant cone, redolent of the sublime, reveals that one desire behind columnar extensions is to reach a higher level of consciousness.



Other sculptors make topless columns without such spiritual overtones—their resemblance is more to the “monument” side of the family. A pragmatic function of very high sculptures is to be seen from miles around: they mark a place.

Twentieth-century art has been much more about placing one’s mark and, in recent decades, about doing that in monumental scale. For that, size is its own virtue. Beverly Pepper utilizes monumental height in her four 28- to 34-foot *Todi Columns* (1979) to effectively assert a sculptural presence separate from the facade of the Brooklyn Museum. The *Columns*’ dark geometrics, abstracted from upright carving tools (chisel, wedges, files), project the hieratic grandeur of ancient triumphal colonnades. Yet as in those ceremonial processions, the viewer standing between these columns isn’t supposed to feel tall by identification but small by contrast. The austere formality accentuates those verticals’ dissimilarity to the looser shape of the vertical human form.

Martin Myers leavens the earnest sobriety of monumental abstractions through ironic juxtapositions. The New York artist covers his blocky pillars of plywood, generally 9–10 feet high, with even, stripes alternating black and white and running in horizontal or vertical sections. Suggesting generic modernist architecture or snappy graphic design, they are witty updates of Johns Storrs’ more literal marble depictions in the 1920s and ’30s of Art Deco skyscrapers. As prototypical

Postmodern works by a sophisticated urban “image scavenger,” these painted sculptures combine Minimalist and Pop styles, and physical containment and illusory extension, neutralizing all beliefs in favor of representations of contemporaneity.

Some columns just want you to have fun. David Hammons wrapped five 25- to 30-foot telephone poles with bright bottle (mostly beer) caps in diamond and zigzag designs, like those in African beadwork and textiles or Islamic mosaics. He then affixed a basketball hoop and backboard at each top end. Hammons called this piece, constructed and installed at Cadman Plaza Park, Brooklyn, in 1986 as a Public Art Fund project, *Higher Goals*. The elevated basketball hoops acted both as a ridiculous gesture and as a challenge to urban kids to aim higher.

Claes Oldenburg articulated an effective approach to making witty yet substantial works of art when he discussed his *Batcolumn* (1977): “I like to combine contemporary banal and historical classical or archaic style. It gives a time dimension to the work.”⁶ The slim, vertical form of the upended baseball bat in front of the Social Security Administration building in downtown Chicago adds a populist twist to the historical associations of the monumental column. It presents a sentimental icon of American sport particularly appropriate to Social Security’s elderly recipients. Additionally, its diagonal, crisscrossing open weave of steel bands makes it appear to be whirling à la

Trajan’s spiral or Bernini’s corkscrew, while a vertical diamond pattern presents another nod to Brancusi’s stacked rhomboids.

In comparison, the literalness of Jonathan Borofsky’s *Man Walking to the Sky* (1991–92) represents the desire for elevation “in the vulgate,” and vulgarizes it. Borofsky’s configuration of a life-sized fiberglass male figure purposefully striding up a slanted 80-foot steel pole displays his characteristic childlike emotional directness. Installed for Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany, this cartoonish version reduces the aspiration of transcendence associated with historic columnar sculptures to worldly ambition.

Above left: Claes Oldenburg, *Batcolumn*, 1977. 100²/₃ ft. x 9 ft. x 9 in. Courtesy SSA Art-in-Architecture Program, Washington, D.C.

Above right: Jonathan Borofsky, *Man Walking to the Sky*, 1991–92. Fiberglass and steel, 73³/₄ ft. high. Photo: Dirk Bleicker, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

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y now alert readers may have noticed that the one metaphoric allusion of the columnar form barely referred to is the phallus. Is this a denial of the shape's bodily affinities?

How could I deny it, when even an innocent escape to Miami brought confrontation with Noguchi's *Man*

(1978), an anatomically

correct granite shaft that towered over me, thrusting more than nine feet toward the sky? Up, up and away indeed! Noguchi was Brancusi's studio assistant early in his career, and produced his homage *Endless Coupling* the year of Brancusi's death, 1957, but in that work the sexual reference is considerably more disguised than in this blatant carving. Yes, there is undoubtedly a "wish fulfillment" function prompting some tall columnar sculptures.

We also cannot deny the reign of the phallus among those who have made columnar sculptures: very few are women. This may be due to the reassuring appeal for men of cylindrical stiffness. Men undoubtedly identify with columns not simply because of morphological affinities, but because they are trained to act assertively, like stalwart structures against the forces of nature. In contrast, women have been historically associated with nature and flowers, and today women still predominate among those making environmental and ecological projects.

But it would burlesque Brancusi's *Endless Column* to reduce it to a desire for infinite erection. It has been claimed: "The *Column* makes its appearance between a succession of erotic female images and a work named after the original couple; it is by definition phallic, and insistently so when inserted into the context in which it was conceived."⁷ This consistency of sexualized forms produced by Brancusi in that period reveals the focus of the artist's expressive concerns. But that doesn't restrict the viewer to the male member for the primary anatomical reference. Brancusi's stack of repeated rhomboids do not resemble a penis (even knobby) but vertebrae.

The fundamental trait of the *Endless Column*, and all those considered here, is verticality: an orientation associated not just with *men* but with what used to be called "mankind"—humanity in general. Whether religious or monumental, formal or funny, the columnar form springs from the urge to rise above, connected to the earth but distinct from the immobility implied by horizontality. The analogy of all these vertical sculptures isn't simply to penile extension—although it might be that too—but to the vertebrae, the spine, the body as a whole. As both the sun and the moon—Apollo and

Luna—ascend from the terra firma, for both men and women the backbone unfolds and extends as we rise to stand and holds us upright. For the extensive metaphor of sculptural "beanstalks"—comprising both the phallic stem and the feminine foliage, and encompassing both the atavistic and the ironic—this is another meaning, found in the body.

Notes

¹Two definitive sources on this sculpture are Sidney Geist, "Brancusi: The Endless Column," *Museum Studies* 16, no. 1 (1990), 71–87, 91; and Francis Naumann, "From Origin to Influence and Beyond: Brancusi's Column Without End," *Arts* 59 (May 1985), 112–118.

²Geist, "Brancusi," 83.

³Margherita Andreotti, "A New Unity of Man and Nature: Jean Arp's Growth of 1938," *Museum Studies* 16, no. 2 (1990), 138.

⁴Geist, "Brancusi," 77, provides photographs and information on this "marvelous transformation: a felled tree returning to its original setting in a sophisticated form, which enhanced that setting."

⁵Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 3.

⁶Coosje van Bruggen and Claes Oldenburg, *Claes Oldenburg: Large-Scale Projects, 1977–1980, A Chronicle* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 12.

⁷Geist, "Brancusi," 75–76.

Suzaan Boettger is an art historian and critic based in New York.