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On the Met Roof, Alicja Kwade's Test of Faith

By Thomas Rogers

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Known for confronting the laws of physics, the Polish-German artist builds a planetary sculpture and ponders our place in the universe



Alicja Kwade in her Berlin studio. She created an abstract sculpture for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Cantor Roof Garden asking visitors to contemplate their assumptions about life on Earth, and beyond.

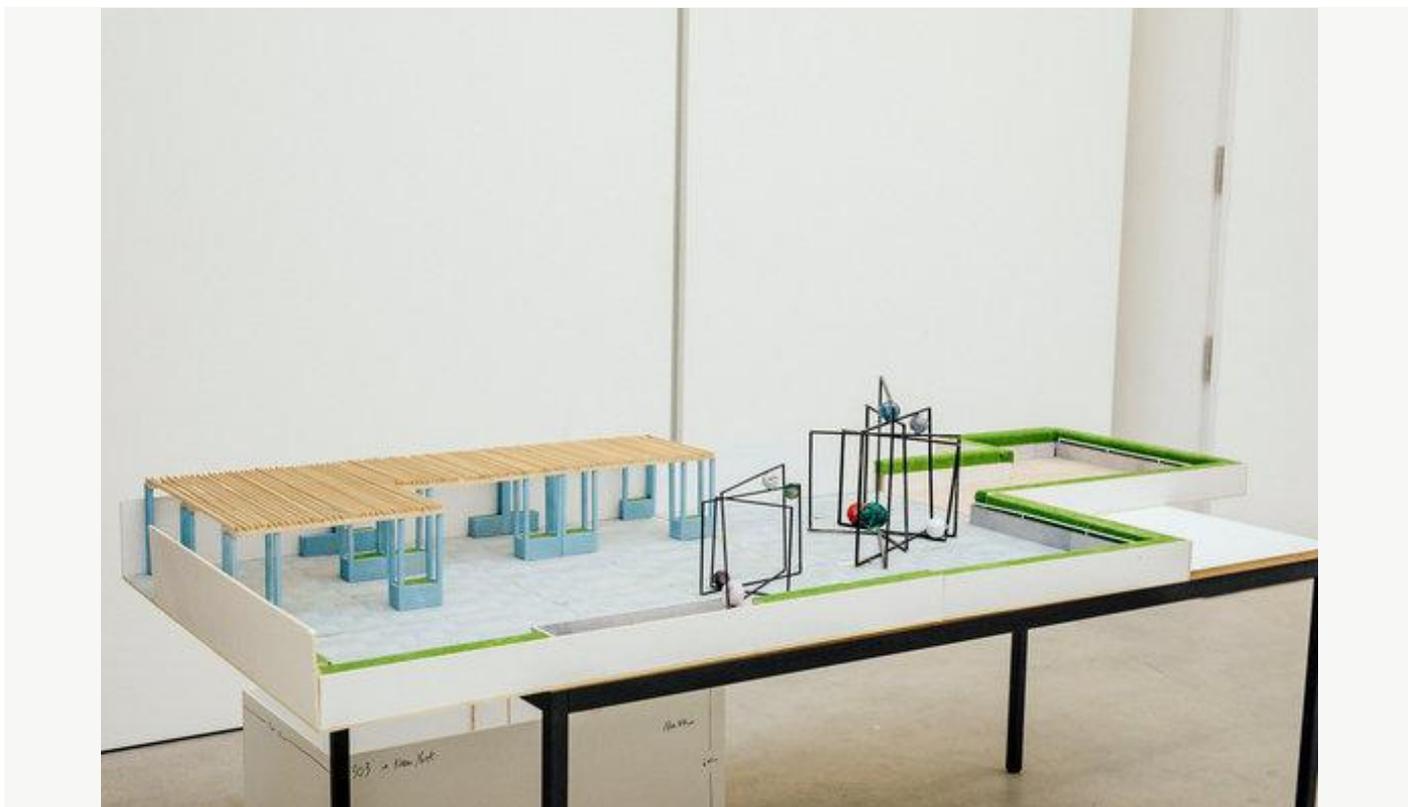
Credit Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

BERLIN — On a recent afternoon in her studio, the Polish-German artist Alicja Kwade was inspecting a model for the work she designed for this spring's Roof Garden Commission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The piece, titled "ParaPivot," consists of two large sculptures made of steel, rectangular frames and several enormous spherical rocks. Ms. Kwade hopes that visitors will be able to walk under the spheres, some of which weigh over a ton, if the museum is able to secure the necessary city approvals.

The experience, in a sense, is to be a test of faith.

As Ms. Kwade adjusted the model, one of the miniature spheres detached and rolled past a small cutout meant to represent a museum visitor. "Oops, that's not supposed to happen," she said, then burst into laughter. She pointed out that the real rocks, gathered from different continents, would remain securely fastened to the structure, even in high winds.

Ms. Kwade, 40, has become known in recent years for her sculptures that seem to test or bend the laws of physics and that explore broader questions about the nature of reality and our position within the universe. The installation, which will open to the public on April 16, is her first solo museum show in New York.



The model for Alicja Kwade's project. "Alicja is trying to use steel and stone and abstraction to make us feel the mystery and absurdity of the human condition," said Kelly Baum, a curator of "ParaPivot."

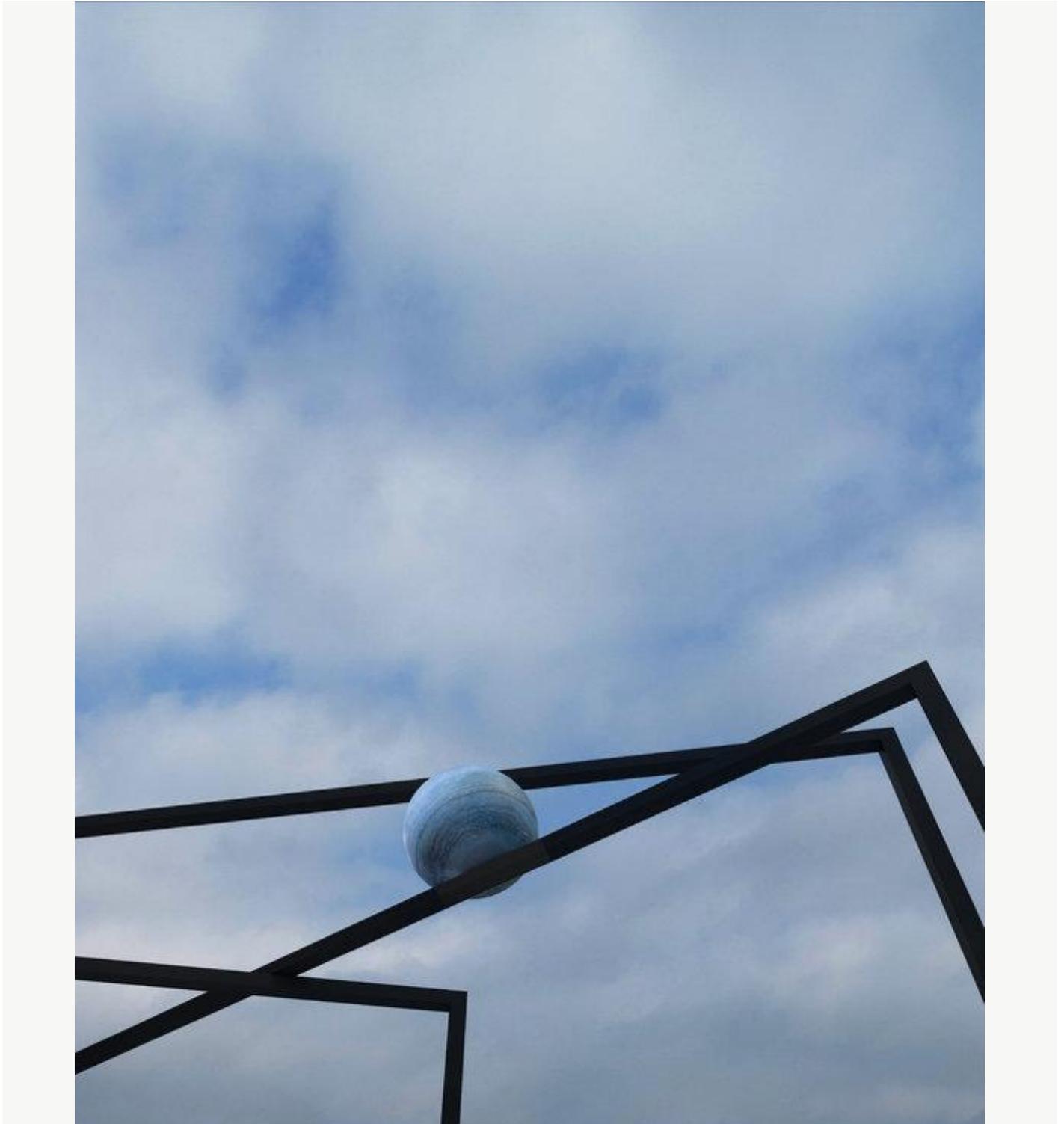
CreditMustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

"Ultimately," she said, sitting in the kitchen of her studio, located in a former industrial space in the city's Oberschöneweide district, "I want to put into perspective our own relative scale, and the relative scale of what we are doing." The work, she said, was meant to encourage visitors to think about Earth itself and the "irrational fact that you are on a sphere, turning at high speed in the void."

Ms. Kwade, who was born in Poland but has lived in Germany since childhood, has the focused intensity and upright posture one might expect of someone who builds mathematically precise large-scale sculptures. She speaks in rat-a-tat German, and peppers her conversations with references to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (sometimes referred to as the "French Freud") and Danish physicist Niels Bohr.

Kelly Baum, the curator at the Met who oversaw the project, said that the artist was selected largely because of the ways her works “play with and exploit illusionism, while referring to scientific principles, to astrophysics.” Her focus on abstraction, she added, marked a departure from the past two commissions.

Last year’s exhibition, [“We Come in Peace”](#) by the Pakistani-born artist Huma Bhabha, consisted of two monumental, loosely figurative sculptures, one standing and one prostrate on the ground, which Ms. Bhabha described as an “antiwar narrative.” In 2017, the Argentine artist Adrián Villar Rojas arranged a Bacchanalian tableau of sculptures largely replicated from the Met collection.



Rendering of “ParaPivot,” a sculpture in which visitors may walk beneath spherical rocks evoking planets.
Credit Alicja Kwade; Roman März

“What I love is that Alicja is trying to use steel and stone and abstraction to make us feel the mystery and absurdity of the human condition, but not in a manner that is outright or explicit,” Ms. Baum said. “She lets us pick up the ball.”

Ms. Kwade said that the idea for “ParaPivot” had emerged from a series of works she had been doing since 2017 involving large rocks suspended on steel bars, often in a solar-system formation. The rocks, she said, were mainly meant to evoke planets, including our own.

“It is like a portrait of Earth, like a strange mirror image,” she said, “as if you’re looking at yourself as a giant.” Lines within the stones, she explained, represented “compressed time,” while the rectangular frames for the new piece, which are arranged in a kind of self-invented clockwork formation, were meant to suggest the many systems — physical, economic, political — that govern our daily lives.

By placing visitors in a position of self-contemplation, she hoped to encourage them to question their beliefs in those systems. She is, admittedly, a skeptic.

“I don’t believe in any firm truths,” she said. Looking around her studio kitchen, she pointed out a lesson in molecular physics: What we observe to be hard surfaces, such as a wooden table top, are in fact made primarily of empty atoms. She asserted that her art “is an attempt to find out what that which we call reality actually is.”



Alicja Kwade’s experiences on both sides of the Berlin Wall may have inspired the mirrored objects that frequently pop up in her work, exploring divergent, but overlapping realities.

Credit Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times



The artwork "Be-Force," from 2019.

Credit via the artist and König Galerie; Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

Ms. Kwade was born in 1979 in Katowice, an industrial city in what was then communist Poland, to a father who worked as an art historian and restorer, and a mother who was a cultural scholar and specialist in Slavic linguistics. She was a skilled artist from a young age; her father would hold drawing competitions among her, her brother and her cousins, in which the prize was a piece of chewing gum from the other side of the Iron Curtain.

Her family escaped to West Germany when Alicja was 8 years old, under the pretense of attending a relative's wedding in France. Because hard currency would have aroused the suspicions of the border guards, her father melted gold and hid it in the car's headlights and doors, and her mother stuffed Alicja's clothes and her brother's with dollar bills. "She told us to pretend we were sleeping," the artist recalled.

Her experiences on both sides of the Berlin Wall, she explained, may have subconsciously inspired the mirrored or doubled objects that frequently pop up in her work. In 2000, while studying at the University of the Arts in Berlin, she saw an image from a fashion magazine of a woman who looked just like her. "I photographed the photo and sent it to my mom as a test, and she thought it was me," she said. She then photographed herself in the same position, and arranged the images so the two figures were looking at each other.

The piece, and its exploration of divergent, but overlapping realities, set the thematic groundwork for most of what followed.

Several works involve placing rocks or trees on either side of mirrors, so they appear to transform themselves — from metallic to wooden, from gray to brown — in their reflections. For “Perception is Reality,” a 2017 exhibition at the [Frankfurter Kunstverein](#), she used a 3-D scanner to create a partial reproduction of a rock. “My intention isn’t so much to copy something as it is to show different possibilities, like matter and antimatter,” she said.



Detail of the Roof Garden sculpture. “ParaPivot’s” visual interactions with the Manhattan skyline are inspired by the city’s skyscrapers, which the artist calls symbols of a capitalist system she mistrusts. Credit Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

Other works have tweaked the rules of physics and the values underpinning our economic and political systems. As part of a 2013 outdoor group exhibition at City Hall Park in New York, she exhibited a Raleigh bike that had been bent into a perfect — and impossible — circle so that the front and back tires met. Ken Johnson, writing in The New York Times, noted that “Journey without arrival (Raleigh)” had [“a nice, counterintuitive simplicity, like a three-dimensional koan.”](#) In an older conceptual piece commenting on luxury and capitalism, she once had nearly 5,000 pounds worth of champagne bottles ground into grain-sized sand and poured in a conical pile.

Lisa Spellman, whose 303 Gallery represents Ms. Kwade in New York, described her in an email as “one of the most important artists of our time” and noted that “her work has become increasingly ambitious and elaborate over the years, in both scale and content.”

The artist said the biggest challenges in creating “ParaPivot” were logistical. Because lifting the sculptures to the roof by crane would have been prohibitively expensive, they had to be painstakingly moved through the building’s hallways and brought up by elevator.

Bernd Euler, a Berlin art-producer whose team built the piece, said over the phone that they had to use a system of chains and a forklift to maneuver the spherical stones, some of which measured over three feet in diameter. Mr. Euler, who has worked with Ms. Kwade for years, described her as very “exact” and “whatever the positive word is for ‘pedantic.’”

Despite the sculptures’ abstract qualities, Ms. Baum said that the work offers a salient commentary on our current moment. “She wants us to engender distrust for the systems and rules which we rely on too passively.”

Her lesson may be taken to heart on the roof of the Met. “ParaPivot’s” visual interactions with the Manhattan skyline, Ms. Kwade said, were partly inspired by the fact that the city’s skyscrapers were symbols of a capitalist system she views with mistrust. From certain angles, she explained, the sculpture’s spherical rocks will look as if they are perched on the surrounding buildings, so that “capitalism becomes a pedestal for the globe.”

She noted that capitalism is seen by many as a “pillar” holding up our society. “Money, economics, capitalism, they have nothing to do with reality,” she said, arguing that they are based entirely on people’s faith. “I don’t believe in any authorities. But that doesn’t necessarily make things easier for me.”

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