

The artist who has made the most extensive use of LEGO bricks is the German sculptor Wolfgang Hahn, who has chosen to work with the bricks instead of more traditional materials. He takes his LEGO work quite seriously, which is to say that he regards it as close to playing, and he has written several short essays explaining his choice of material and his aesthetic of the LEGO brick. He admits that his medium is unusual, and one that may not offer all the artistic and physical satisfactions of sculpting in stone. In one essay he wrote, "At some time in his life, every sculptor dreams – like Michelangelo – of standing face to face with a massive block of marble and getting to work on it with hammer and chisel: a muscular giant in the grip of inspiration, forcing his will on the brittle material."

But the classic materials of sculpture inevitably produce a monumental style of art with an air of permanence about it, which Hahn believes does not reflect the true state of contemporary culture. The culture of the late twentieth century is provisional and ever-changing, as society itself undergoes rapid changes and seeks to understand them. "I don't think the present is the time for monumental art," he once wrote, "we are much too busy seeking a new understanding of ourselves to be able to afford that kind of thing .... So what we need to do is produce art on credit. But for that we need a 'recyclable material.'"

The search for a material that would reflect contemporary culture led Hahn to LEGO bricks. "I played with LEGO bricks as a child; it is a material of my generation," he wrote. "LEGO bricks satisfy all the demands a sculptor can make on a material. They are a raw material typical for our age. Form and function are identical – and an immense amount of creativity has gone into their development.... They provoke a playful work form, and they can be reused." And in a large understatement, he noted that "LEGO bricks have not yet turned up in the history of art," thus leaving him with complete freedom to do what he wished with them, without having the spirits of the old masters peering over his shoulder.

Hahn is perhaps the ideal artist to work in LEGO bricks because he approaches his work with total seriousness and total playfulness. He is an intriguing theorist who is also a jokester. Hahn's first idea for a LEGO construction was to build a cube, about six feet in each dimension, out of black, eight-stud LEGO bricks. It would have been the most massive LEGO brick construction ever built, and Hahn planned the project specifically to win the cube an entry in *The Guinness Book of World Records* – a dubious honor for

a work of art, but that was exactly Hahn's intention, to question the nature of artistic achievement. He would also have succeeded in mocking Minimalism by creating a Minimalist work out of a toy; and by using LEGO bricks, he would erase the personality and authority of the artist. And one of his friends, an art critic, commented, "No future art historian would have been able to decide whether an identical cube were an authentic Hahn or an equally authentic duplicate." Hahn approached the LEGO company for the needed bricks, and at first they were receptive to the idea (which appealed to the company's own well developed sense of humor). But when they calculated that the project would require 1,600,000 bricks, weighing almost four tons, they had to refuse. So the LEGO cube never got off the drawing board.

In 1985 Hahn exhibited several LEGO brick sculptures, under the title "Illuminations", at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. The sculptures were hollow geometric forms, made from transparent bricks, with television sets inside illuminating them. One was a monolith that resembled a skyscraper, another was a rectangle that lay on its side on the floor, and the third was a monolith with an arm that enters the wall, suggesting the schematic shape of a stovepipe.

The sculptures were displayed in a small, dark room with a curtained door. The only light came from the sculptures themselves. The impression was of entering the inner sanctuary of a temple to art, but the idols of his cult were made of LEGO bricks. And instead of flickering braziers there were flickering TV sets, emitting their eerie hum. The light was eerie as well, with its neutral silver muted and diffused by the transparent bricks. This strangely unsettling light in the temple of art was an effect that Hahn had planned. He said, "I had wanted to work with light for a long time, and the 'sterility' of the transparent bricks really inspired me."