

By ROBERTA SMITH

The venerable Sculpture Center has a new home and a new look that is nothing if not funky, at least for the time being. Forsaking its charming 1885 carriage house on East 69th Street, this 72-year-old institution has relocated to a 1908 brick building where trolley cars were once repaired. This small step up in the history of transportation architecture involves a major shift in locale. Its new home is in Long Island City, Queens: a grimy brick structure whose ceilings soar to 40 feet. It is hard by an off-ramp of the Queensboro Bridge and a short walk from the P.S. 1 Center for Contemporary Art.

The building has yet to be renovated (its new design is in the hands of the architect Maya Lin), and the center's small staff has temporary offices nearby. But with the project still on the drawing board, the center is staging a preopening show in which 27 artists have insinuated their work into the building, frequently in site-specific ways.

The result is "Interval: New Art for a New Space," a lively if uneven show that snakes through, around, beside and beneath the building. It forms a partial, nonchalant survey of contemporary sculpture, half good, half not so good. Overall, it feels like a small version of the old, early 1980's P.S. 1.

"Interval" celebrates more than a change of address. It seems intended to announce a change of institutional personality, from genteel to rugged, and perhaps from marginal to underground or something close — or, as some have suggested, from serious to hip.

There were protests last spring when the Sculpture Center's board voted to sell the Manhattan building for \$3.65 million and closed the studio program that occupied its upper floors. The new home cost about \$1 million; the remaining money will go toward renovation as well as to an endowment, which the Sculpture Center has never had.

How much the new quarters will change the center remains to be seen. But they give it nearly four times as much exhibition space — making room at least for more personalities if not necessarily different ones. There is also the potential for a spectacular central gallery that sculptors should find inspirational.

Many of the building's current features and quirks, some of which may disappear in the redesign, have been put to use or taken as inspiration in this show. These include a mezzanine, a small elevated office overlooking a walk-in tool cage, a walled side yard, and a basement that consists entirely of corridors, tunnels,

nooks and crannies. This last labyrinthine space is a result of the thick walls that reinforce the ground floor and make it especially suitable for sculpture.

The artists in this show seem to be mostly young or youngish, although it's hard to know for sure in an era when listing one's birth date on a résumé seems to be completely out of fashion. Nonetheless, the information provided indicates that nearly half the artists in the exhibition have not had solo shows in New York, although most have appeared in group shows, and that several are just out of graduate school.

(Another tic is more understandable but also self-serving: the posting of artists' statements beside several works. They allude to the attack on the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, usually expressing hope that viewers will find the artist's efforts appropriate but sometimes fretting that they won't.)

Sculpture is a relative term these days. Like three-dimensional work in general, what appears in "Interval" ranges from near-invisibility to material excess, low-tech to (almost) high, flat to walk-in, tangible to televised. Between these extremes, artists seem to combine and recombine a fairly standard set of components: video; objects that have been made, found or bought; installations that may or may not be site-specific; and performance.

Architecture and design are recurring themes; religion is often a subtext. The process- and performance-oriented part of the 1970's sometimes feels so prevalent that the term Nauman Effect might come in handy.

A mix of varying amounts of video, site and object is especially popular. Danielle Webb's ingenious "Taking Up Space" consists of a huge ball of heavy white crumpled paper exhibited in the space where it was made, along with a video showing how that is the best part. Similarly, Samuel Nigro's "Polishing Granite," a large rock resting on a wood sled, is accompanied by a process-revealing video. It documents the artist performing the Herculean feat of dragging the stone across the Queensboro Bridge, from the Sculpture Center's old home to its new one.

The center's move is also the subject of two site-specific works that concentrate exclusively on objects: Paolo Arao's two-part "Escape Plan," which begins with a faithful architectural model of the old space; and "Extrusion," a 25-foot-high obelisk that Ron Baron made from detritus collected at the new site.

Video plus site, but with no object, was the method employed by Douglas Ross, who taped himself standing in the new building's dingy elevated office, harmonizing with the air conditioner to create an unearthly but not scary sound. The video is on view in the same office, and one can walk through a glass door into the portion containing the air conditioner, where silence reigns.

In the tool cage below Mr. Ross's work, Julianne Swartz's festive arrangement of its contents, aided by lamps, tinsel and pinwheels, seems almost a sendup of installation art. So do the distorting lenses through which one can observe the work's aquariumlike second self, which instantly provide the distancing effects of video.

In "Natural History II" Chris Doyle uses video straight up to create a sculptural animation in which bricks assemble and reassemble in a clever but mesmerizing narrative.

Several of the show's strongest works are near the outer limits of either visibility or material accumulation. A standout among the easy-to-miss is Monika Goetz's installation in the courtyard, "Heaven on Earth," achieved simply by placing 13 500-watt reflector bulbs behind a glass-brick window in the courtyard wall. The window glows as if lighted by a permanent sunrise, and its peaceful optimism is especially warming right now.

To the other extreme is Yoko Inoue's ambitious if somewhat confused "Fair Trade/Child Labor: Do Not Leave Your Child Unattended," which fills a long, catacomblake tunnel with thousands of carefully lined-up or stacked objects, both mass-produced and handmade. It combines elements of warehouse, shrine and baby shower gone mad, and its saving grace is widespread evidence of the artist's touch. The multitude of mass-produced goods is blanketed with small hand-formed objects in unfired clay: little bones, balls, apparently dead birds and possible flower petals.

The transcendence implied by the progression of Ms. Inoue's work from colored objects to white ones seems to be reached just around the corner in another long tunnel. This one is filled with Zach Hadlock's "Still," a perfectly repeating floral pattern of white sand that suggests an ocean.

There's much else of interest here: Peter Gould's life-size picturesque bridge, a stage-set hybrid of Japanese garden and American golf course, which has the brightness and crispness of a cartoon image brought to life; David Altmejd's matrixlike grid covered completely in mirrors, making a wobbly, disco-style Sol LeWitt; Barbara Gallucci's enlarged knockoff of an Eames coffee table, although the video's added drama seems superfluous; and Robert Fischer's ghostly fragment of a forlorn backstairs and rented room, also full-size and rendered mostly in wood, duct tape and Saran Wrap.

It's up and down from here, with works that are derivative, hard to spot or in need of further development. But further development seems to be what the Sculpture Center hopes to facilitate, and on a broader front.

"Interval: New Art for a New Space" is at the Sculpture Center, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens, (718) 361-1750, through Oct. 28