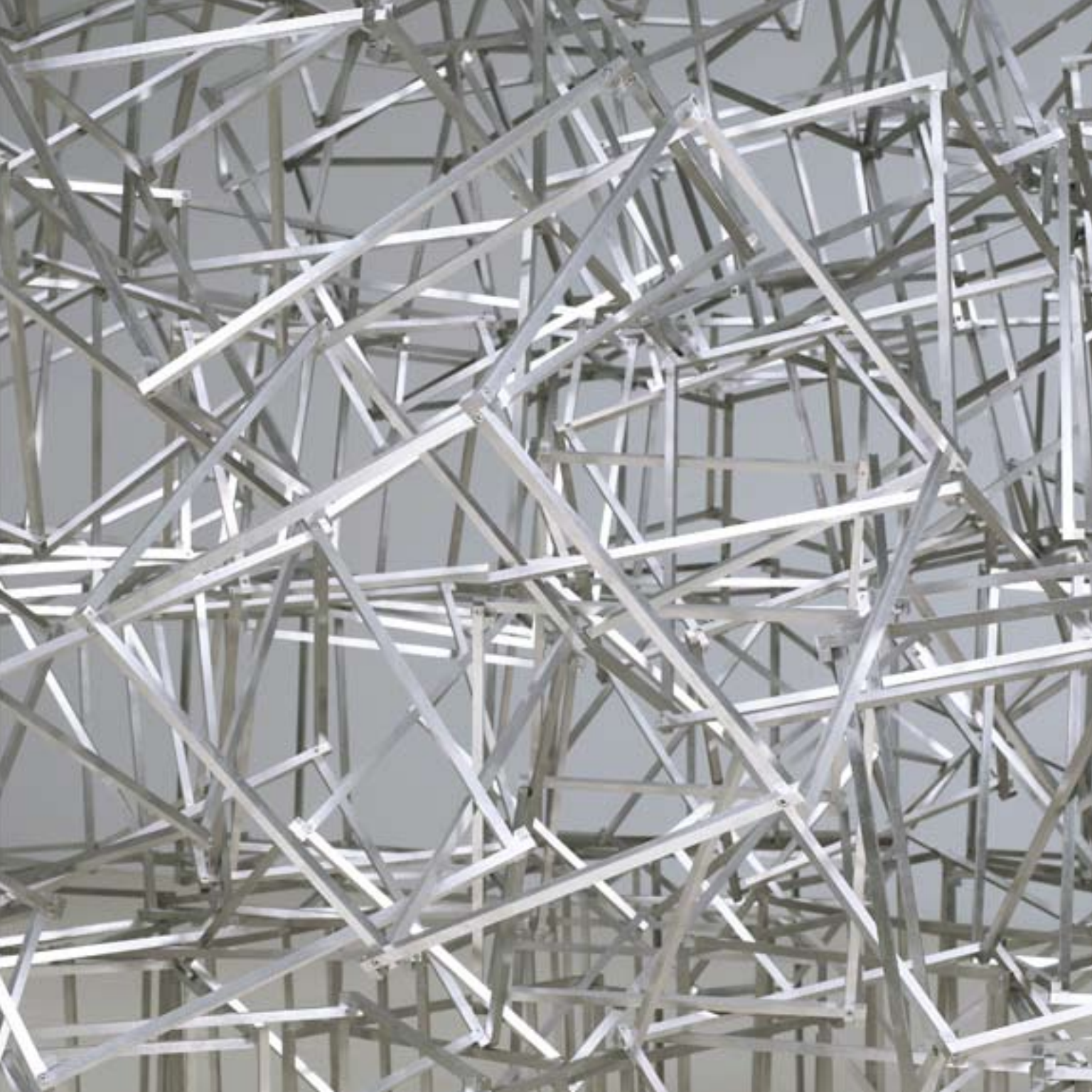


# CORBAN WALKER

“Man is the measure of all things”, went the old humanist creed. Then, removed from nature’s pinnacle, man became simply a reed, but, as Blaise Pascal put it, a thinking reed. Further devalued, no longer an emblem of spirit, the body became just a portable assembly of viscera and organs.

Yet the body as measure, empirical interpreter of distance, height, location, has its uses. Its idealistic aura long gone, it is human engineering’s rule of measure, of median percentiles standardising the design of its immediate environment. For architecture, Le Corbusier invented his modular man, the denatured emblem of Renaissance man. Now Corban Walker, the son of an architect, establishes himself as measure of his own art his body as mirror, unit, module, standard. With this insistence—it is nothing less—he remakes his environment according to his own measure. This we all do so some extent. Paintings are hung too high for some, too low for others. Scissors punish the left-handed. Seats (including aeroplane seats) make no concessions to the very tall. The list can go on. The world of the basketball player is not our world. Nor is the world of the very small. The shadow of Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver falls across our world every day. This is a preface to citing the fact that Corban Walker is four feet tall.

To make a disadvantage his advantage is intrinsic not just to Corban Walker’s art but to life as he lives it. As an equal member of any community through which he may pass, Walker asks no concessions, nor does he give any. Part of this may be due to his extraordinary parents—his father Robin was a distinguished architect, his mother Dorothy a well-known cultural critic. One of Walker’s early artworks was a small step he made to accommodate his size. It gave notice that his redesign of the world would fit his own corpus, not necessarily yours or mine.



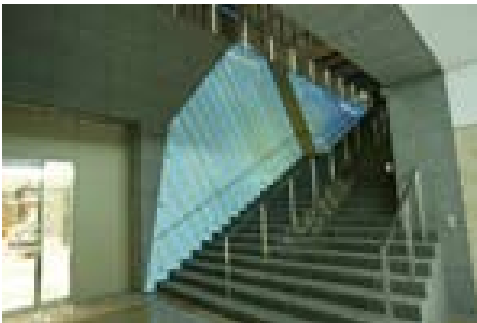


*Mapping 4, 2000*

Walker first declared his presence on the New York scene at the Pace Gallery in 2000 with *Mapping 4*. A glittering environment of glass modules—fourteen feet high, four inches wide—leaned (leaning and stacking are his verbs) against the gallery walls to produce a standoff between order and disorder—a good look if you can achieve it. The leaning angles varied. The intervals were irregular. Transparency and reflection, the light-trapping density of glass, its ultimate opaqueness when stacked, are properties so insistently appropriated by Walker that they have become his emphatic signature. The gallery was dissolved into a wilderness of reflections. One of the most daring exhibitions of the year, it was obsessional and relentless, an act of will without being willful. In its sharp edges and sometimes perilous leans, it was dangerous. The threat of splintered chaos was held in abeyance. A soundless piece implicitly invoked sound. The result was a kind of mad beauty that avoided the decorative, a seduction glass slyly offers.

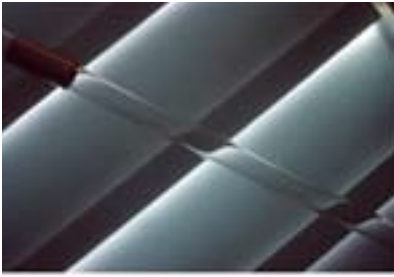
Sometimes popular art and fine art attempt to converge and end up intersecting, each then going their own way. The crystalline, light-struck arctic environment designed for the *Superman* movie (1978) touched on Walker's concerns and then moved on. But where in this uncollectible extravaganza at Pace was the figure of the artist? Yes, the four-inch wide glass was a twelfth of his height, but he answer was in the gallery's central square column. A peephole at the artist's eyelevel compelled us to bend (itself a metaphor) for viewing. What was seen? Nothing came into exclusive focus. The act of bending and looking at the installation was its main content.

Walker walks the world at a different scale from most people. That's obvious. What's not obvious is how his pedestrian experience defines his survey of the terrain. Ramps and staircases frequently attract his attention. Two permanent installations (*Scales* in Tokyo, and *Stair*, in Cork, Ireland) take the staircase as subject and model. On the adjacent walls, glassy units climb the stairs in the same rhythmic progression. Ascending and descending, the user's reflected image strobes by. Human engineering pays a lot of attention to the height of steps. They are usually set at median percentiles. Step-height, width, and degree of inclination are the basic variables. Such decisions are always under inquiry and are revised according to the community they serve. Our predecessors, a foot shorter, would scale their environs differently.



*Scales, 2002*

For one of Walker's most interesting "stair-pieces" *Off the Glass*, he found a partner, the basketball player, Shaquille O'Neal—all seven foot, one inch of him. The exhibition "Size Does Matter" was curated by O'Neal in 2010 for The FLAG Art Foundation in New York. Ascending along the wall step by step, vinyl markers incrementally climbed from Walker's four feet to O'Neal's seven. A more complex



Stair, 2000



Off the Glass, 2010

blue and green vinyl drawing on the opposite wall conjugated their height differences inventively.

In this, as in other works, Walker's revisioning of accepted norms is as sharp as the edges of his glass. He bends the spectator to his will. This aggression is dissembled, but it is there. Walker's revised scale is not a humorous ploy to be indulged; it is deadly serious. How this is enacted in his work through his modular repertory of glass and mirror —incremental rotation and reversal of planes—is easily read. It is done without rancor, which rhymes with Walker's amiable and optimistic temperament. Never accusatory, his work is a testament to his character.

Always sensitive to context—to be expected from one who experiences every unaccommodating wrinkle in the built environment—Walker's work is always sited with discretion (careful reading of a given space) or aggression (free-standing works, often gleaming stacks of glass designed to produce powerful geometric configurations, sometimes with a central well which plumbs the work's depth). He is always aware—as his architectural heritage may remind him—of the moving spectator. Walker's four-foot Modular scale, his Vitruvian Man, ends up questioning the spectator's habits, conventions of viewing, and ultimately his or her self-image. This is a considerable achievement. One of many possible examples: *Louvre*, 2000, a row of angled glass and mirror, is set at four feet high. Serially mirrored in the clefts and angles of the reflective surfaces, half the spectator's body is eclipsed. What other advantaged or disadvantaged community would require the world to be re-designed? Basketball players, for whom the scaling of the domestic environment is unsympathetic. With them, Walker has a lot in common. The rest of us, of various sizes in between, make do with design's certified templates projecting its versions of our height and substance.

The Irish Pavilion at Venice gives an international audience the opportunity to see new work by this fascinating mid-career sculptor. His major work for Venice, *Please Adjust*, is a stack of interlocking stainless steel open cubes, skeletal frames, which, in their changing configurations, respond to gravity's gentle pull. Sol LeWitt's rational order of cubes has been both imploded and exploded. The stack is subject to alteration at each installation, so that no master image of the work appears. It remains as subtle and elusive as a reflected image, as do the athletic permutations, reversals, and serialised vinyl drawings *Modular*, and *Transparent Wall*, the artist has applied to the windows of the space—all scaled of course, to his unyielding standard.

BRIAN O'DOHERTY



# IRELAND AT VENICE 2011



## THE 54TH INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION / LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

4 June – 27 November, 2011

Istituto Santa Maria Della Pietà, Calle della Pietà, Castello

Tuesday–Sunday 10.00–18.00

[www.irelandvenice.ie](http://www.irelandvenice.ie)

**Artist:** Corban Walker

**Commissioner:** Emily-Jane Kirwan

**Curator:** Eamonn Maxwell

Education/Invigilator Management: Jennifer Marshall

Download **Corban Walker: Ireland at Venice 2011**, available for free on the App Store and on the Android Market.

Ireland at the 54th International Art Exhibition / La Biennale di Venezia is an initiative of Culture Ireland in partnership with the Arts Council / an Comhairle Ealaíon

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## WORKS AT THE PAVILLION

*Please Adjust*, 2011

160 stainless steel frames

Each: 16 x 14 x 14" (40.6 x 35.6 x 35.6 cm)

Installation dimensions variable

*Modular*, 2011

vinyl

Installation dimensions variable, site specific

*Transparent Wall*, 2011

vinyl

Installation dimensions variable, site specific

## ESSAY BY BRIAN O'DOHERTY

*Mapping 4*, 2000

glass, two-way mirror and acrylic

50 glass units, each: 14' x 4' x 3/8" (426.7 x 10.2 x .63 cm)

Installation dimensions variable

*Scales*, 2002

sandblasted float glass, acrylic film, painted steel,  
fibre optics, LED, and stainless steel

Left Wall: 22' x 38' 7" x 6" (6.77 x 11.8 m x .16 m)

Permanent installation Marunouchi Building, Tokyo

*Stair*, 2000

sandblasted float glass, fibre optics, wood, stainless  
steel, and borosilicate glass

21' 3" x 39' 3" x 9' 8" (6.5 x 12 x 0.25 m)

Permanent installation Crawford Municipal Art Gallery,  
Cork, Ireland

*Off the Glass*, 2010

vinyl

Installation dimensions variable, site specific

Artwork © Corban Walker, courtesy The Pace Gallery

Essay © Brian O'Doherty

Map by Michael Sherman

Photography by John Kellet, Kerry McFate, Bill Scanga,  
Tetsuhito Tanaka, and Ellen Page Wilson



(from left) Scale model of the Pavilion; Artist's studio with works in progress

## THE IRISH PAVILION 2011

Corban Walker's presentation at the Irish Pavilion comprises three new works: a stainless steel sculpture *Please Adjust* and two vinyl drawings *Modular* and *Transparent Wall* (all 2011).

*Please Adjust*, the largest work, comprises 160 interlocking stainless steel cube frames. As the title suggests the configuration which is subject to alteration at each installation questions the notion of sculpture as a constant stable form. The title also references the enormous economic crisis that has affected nearly every country since 2008, Ireland in particular, and how we as individuals may have to adjust expectations and positions. Just as each unit in this sculpture depends on the other for stability, individuals are all

subject to the consequences of one action against another and exterior forces beyond our control.

The vinyl drawings involve Walker's response to his experience of the built environment and also play on mathematical rules and principles, both common themes in his work. *Modular* is a representation and skewing in blue vinyl of his personal height: 1,290mm applied to the windows of the Pavilion. The second drawing, also affixed onto a screen of windows, is a visual game of sorts whereby the artist begins with a black vinyl square of 60mm and projects this square, successively reducing it by half its own dimension until it becomes 0mm and thus invisible, hence the title *Transparent Wall*.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**CORBAN WALKER** (b. 1967, Dublin, Ireland) is an artist known for his investigations of perceptions of scale and architectural constructs. At the height of four-feet tall, the artist's personal relationship between self and the built environment is fundamental to the way he defines and develops his work. Embracing concepts of both architecture and minimalism, Walker uses specific local and cultural philosophies to encourage viewers to reexamine the way they conceptualise, navigate, and interact with their surroundings. The artist's work is marked by carefully considered shifts in proportion and balance and is also distinguished by a diverse use of industrial materials traditionally associated with the built environment, including L.E.D., glass, stainless steel, aluminum and vinyl.

Since graduating from the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, with a degree in Sculpture in 1992, Walker has worked across a broad range of media, ranging from painting, drawing, photography, digital art, and sculpture to large-scale and site-specific installations. The artist has mounted numerous solo exhibitions worldwide, and has also realised seven permanent public commissions for important institutions such

as the Bank of Scotland Headquarters, Dublin and Mitsubishi Estate Co. Ltd., Tokyo. In 1996, the artist represented Ireland in *L'Imaginaire Irlandais Festival*, in Poitiers, France. His work is part of numerous public and private collections around the world, including the Irish Museum of Art, Dublin. In 2008, Walker was a Visiting Artist at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington. The artist is represented by The Pace Gallery and has lived and worked in New York since 2004.

Recent projects include *Mapping Hugh Lane*, 2009, part of The Golden Bough Series of Contemporary installations at Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane, Dublin, curated by Michael Dempsey; and *Off the Glass*, created for the exhibition *Size Does Matter* at the FLAG Art Foundation, New York in 2010 (curated by American basketball player Shaquille O'Neal), which explored the challenges of scale that the artist—and the curator—confront in the built environment.



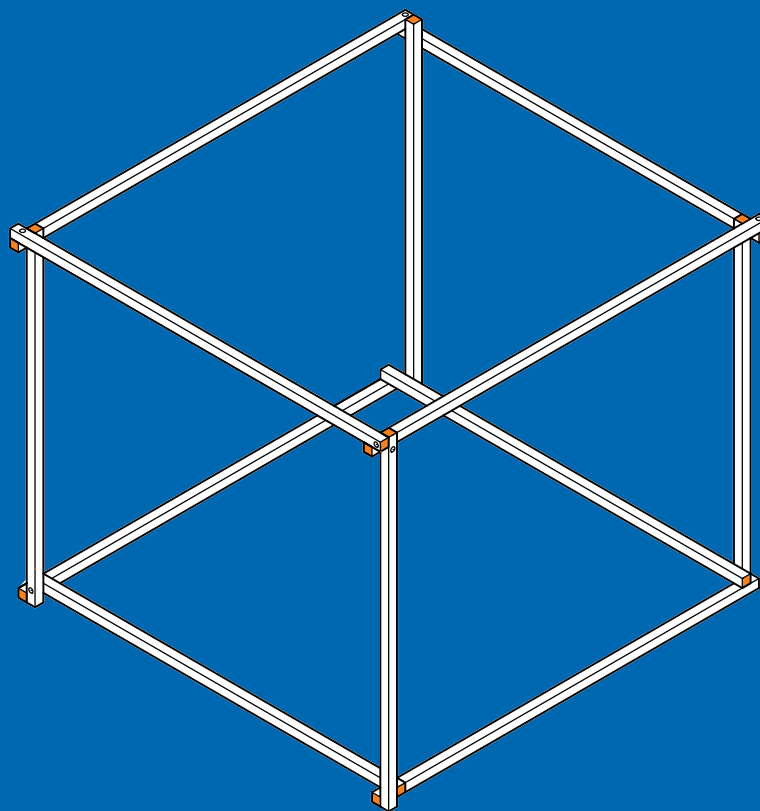
Artist in the Pavilion Venice



la Biennale di Venezia

54. Esposizione  
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Partecipazioni nazionali



# CORBAN WALKER

IRISH PAVILION / VENICE 2011

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