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MARY MISS: KNOWING YOUR PLACE

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

MARY MISS HAS been making art in, and about, the environment since the late 1960s. More specifically, she treats the surface of the landscape as a permeable skin, and pays particular attention to places where the solid parts of the planet meet the watery ones: riverbanks, lakefronts, tidal basins, even an old swimming pool. A pioneer of public sculpture that integrates urban planning and landscape design, she has created many permanent public projects, the best known of which is South Cove, completed in 1987 at the base of the esplanade along Manhattan's Hudson River. Bringing pedestrians alongside and even over the water, South Cove also features planting, seating and lighting. Similarly intimate water access is offered by public projects Miss has built in Des Moines, St. Louis and elsewhere. (Among her major landlocked projects is a permanent installation at the Union Square station of New York's subway system; it excavates old mosaics, tiles and signage, and highlights them with frames, mirrors and text.)

Over the years, as threats to the natural world have steadily increased, Miss's emphasis has shifted from formal, metaphorical and experiential concerns to more practical issues. *FLOW: Can You See the River?*, installed last fall in Indianapolis, is the first of her completed long-term public artworks to make this commitment fully clear.

More than a dozen years in the planning (and the survivor of plenty of economic storms), the project involves a visually sleek, conceptually elegant and technologically sophisticated network of markers and information stations. Descriptive literature makes it sound dauntingly complicated. At first hand, though, *FLOW* is disarmingly—even sur-



View of Mary Miss's long-term installation *FLOW: Can You See the River?*, 2011, showing three red markers and two etched mirrors. Courtesy Indianapolis Museum of Art. Photo Mary Miss.

prisingly—simple. Over 100 round mirrors of polished stainless steel, mounted at average human height on stands, are placed at intervals on the grounds of the Indianapolis Museum of Art's 100-acre sculpture park and at further points along a 6-mile stretch of the city's White River. The mirrors reveal features of ecological interest. Each catches, on its surface, a reflection of one of the shiny red balls mounted on little metal spikes that are also placed along or near the water. They look, as they are meant to, like oversize Google Maps pins; Miss also sometimes refers to them as acupuncture points. Every mirror has a flat red dot on it, and if, when facing the mirror, you line up the reflected ball with the dot, you bring the intended ecological feature into the mirror's frame. At the same time, you put yourself there, too, becoming inextricably implicated in the pictured environment. Slight curvatures in the mirrors place each dot at the vortex of a shallow

depression, creating a subtly liquid sucking-in of visual information around an incipiently swallowed-up you.

Your interest thus provoked, you can use your cell phone to dial up information about each highlighted site (identifying information and numbers appear in white characters on the mirrors). The short audio narratives concern matters of hydrological, geological or meteorological interest, and their consequences for local flora and fauna. For instance, where a mirror reflects the concrete abutment for a bridge now missing its span, the audio text draws your attention to numbers painted on the concrete measuring flood levels reached there in the last century. At a mirror near a tree with gnaw marks a few feet above the ground, the audio explains that while beavers commonly chew on trunks and limbs, tooth marks this high up suggest simultaneous high water and below-freezing temperatures, which provide the notoriously eager eaters

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

FLOW: Can You See the River? is on view for three years at the Indianapolis Museum of Art's Fairbanks Art and Nature Park.

SITE SPECIFICS

an elevated layer of ice—and also establish another record of river flooding.

The most low-tech—though not least effective—component of *FLOW* is a series of simple red bands circling the trunks of trees that surround a lake on the museum's grounds. These mark the point to which the water would rise in a "100-year flood." (Each year there is a one-percent chance of a flood reaching this level based on long-standing data.) At the other end of the technological spectrum is a cell phone app (it is also accessible online, at trackaraindrop.org) that allows users to trace the progress of "a raindrop" from the caller's position through the streets, drainage pipes and runoff areas of Indianapolis to its natural waterways. The relationship between urban infrastructure and nature's own systems for maintenance and renewal are primary among the interactions Miss illuminates.

ARMED WITH AN UNERRING FORMAL SENSE, MISS FAVORS INFORMING OVER ADVOCATING.

FLOW: Can You See the River? opened just a few weeks after the temporary installation of a related project on Broadway at 137th Street in Manhattan. The first of a series of up to 20 such "hubs" along Broadway planned for 2013, collectively titled "Broadway: 1000 Steps," the installation at 137th Street used the same basic vocabulary as *FLOW*: mirrors on stands and short dial-up narratives, though here with some textual information additionally available on the reflective surfaces and on discs facing them. The strikingly literary texts, written by renowned author, urbanist and longtime *New Yorker* staff writer Tony Hiss, drew attention to the intersection of local history, both natural and cultural; urban design, with an emphasis on infrastructure; the sustainable use of local resources; and nutrition—the last an issue of particular concern to a community where diabetes is rampant and fresh produce and locally sourced food are notoriously hard to find.

For this pilot "Broadway" hub, the Miss studio, in partnership with the Institute for Learning Innovation, was awarded funding from the National Science Foundation to "explore," as the grant application put

it, "how art installations can shape the public discourses surrounding the science and engineering decisions that shape the city." In particular, this first installation is being used as an occasion to test how the "streetscape"—manhole covers, sewers and water treatment centers, for example—might be redefined as a "sustainability learning tool." The grant for Miss's "Broadway" hub was the first artist-initiated project to be supported by the NSF. The award

suggests how far afield scientists feel they need to reach at a time when public interest in environmental issues (and many forms of biological research) is diminishing at an alarming rate. Climate researchers face skepticism from political conservatives who dispute evidence of global warming that is accepted by a worldwide scientific majority. (Perhaps more to the point, the right wing also opposes the business regulations needed to mitigate the pollution causing the problem.) For progressive art to be endorsed by a federal agency as a way of addressing a social and political impasse is a fairly radical turn of events.

Because the "Broadway" installation was defined for the purposes of the grant as a science experiment, the hypothesis it posed—that art can change people's minds—was tested by accumulating "data": conversations were staged on-site between professionals and passersby, video documentation made and responses solicited. I was contracted to help document this project and provide some art-context input. In this capacity, I was an observer when five lively focus groups—the official term was "forums"—were assembled one Sunday in September to assess Miss's effort. The groups were composed of students, professionals in the private and public sectors, academics and "stakeholders"—individuals representing the community's interests; the artist was not present. The results of the hub, in terms



The 137th Street hub of Miss's project "Broadway: 1000 Steps," 2011-ongoing, showing a convex mirror with content discs. Photo Olivia Georgia.

of impact on community thinking and public policy, are now being evaluated.

Many artists have made works that draw attention to, or function as, ways to remediate ecological damage, and many—ranging from Helen and Newton Harrison and Jackie Brookner to Brandon Ballengée—have worked in close collaboration with a wide range of scientists, as Miss has done for both these projects. (Seldom before, though, have the protocols of scientific research been retrofitted for art.) As with any kind of activist art, the difficulty is engaging the unconvinced—or, even harder, the uninterested. Miss, who approaches that challenge armed above all with an unerring formal sense, says she favors informing over advocating. Like most worthy art, her projects make viewers both more alert and more self-conscious.

During a lecture at the IMA, she referred to the famous Borges parable of a map the size of the territory it charts; *FLOW*, she noted, is similarly a point-by-point, real-size mapping of a water system. She also cited something said to her by one of her scientific collaborators: "All property is riverfront property—the river starts at your front door." It is an aphorism that echoes one sometimes invoked by landscape painters, which notes that the sky starts

at your feet. Together, these rhetorical figures suggest the tactics that are distinctive to Miss's work. Pulling viewers in, sometimes below the ground or sea level and always deep into the thick of things, she makes us feel our place. ○

The 137th Street hub of "Broadway: 1000 Steps" was on view from Sept. 17-Dec. 10, 2011. Additional hubs are planned for the spring of 2013.

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