

TOWARD A REDEFINITION OF PUBLIC SCULPTURE

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If an artist is asked to do a sculpture for a community, they will usually be expecting something only slightly less impressive than the Statue of Liberty, or at least reminiscent of the statue of General Kosciusko they remember from the local park as a child. "Monuments": the public expects the commemorative (literally speaking) and also, if possible, the majestic. In the meantime, sculpture has become "non-objective" (it cannot commemorate) and it is always physically less impressive than our twentieth century engineering monuments. It would also be difficult to find a subject that any group can agree to commemorate.

The recently completed Vietnam War Memorial in Washington reflected some of these problems. The guidelines stated very clearly that the monument should avoid provoking any of the activities of the Viet Nam war protest era. The space should not encourage large gatherings of people; it was to be integrated into a discrete corner of the mall area in Washington. Their final selection was the most invisible sculpture-monument, designed by an architecture student. It is cut into the ground to blend totally with the landscape--the antithesis of the heroic monument had been requested and received. Of course, afterwards members of Congress and some Veterans groups were rather upset by this and decided to place statues and a flag-pole within this finished work.

Another view of the artist is as a producer of luxury items, commodities for an elite, privileged group. Art is something that can be traded almost like stocks and bonds. Then too, there is the tradition of art reinforcing the values of the church or state; that view is seemingly expressed by government sponsored art projects. But the public will usually be extremely suspicious of the intrusion of government directives in the projects that appear in their communities. (A federal program that often places such projects is the Government Services

Administration, or G.S.A.; a certain percentage of their building budget goes toward art work.) But this is not necessarily something the public is happy to receive. In fact, they will often find that the art has no relationship to their daily lives and consider it to be a waste of their money by the government. What shifts of the last 80 years are responsible for these problems?

At the beginning of the twentieth century, sculpture began a rather self-reflective dialogue about form with an increasing reduction of referential content. The 'avant-garde' continually rejected historical roles as it sought a new base of operations for the individual artist. Any consideration of the public or their needs would be antithetical to this role.

At the same time, while there were great changes in attitude and in the actual form of twentieth century sculpture, there seemed to be little consideration given to the context in which these works would be seen. Though the content and image had altered radically from the traditional sculpture-as-monument, the artist and architect continued the tradition of placing works outdoors, usually in close proximity to buildings. Everyone seemed to presume that since they had been seen together in the past, there was no reason not to continue this tradition. There was no feeling of necessity on the part of most artists to reconsider what site would be appropriate or that the work might be altered for the site. This attitude is clearly expressed in a quote of the British sculptor William Tucker: "If you have to change a sculpture for a site there is something wrong with the sculpture." These are the works that came to be seen most often in public places. To the architects, they were only baubles to add a final touch to the front of buildings or a plaza; and the historical alignment of sculpture with the church or state was replaced with the use by business of the abstract sculpture as a symbol for the corporation, or a least to add a touch of class.

Today, the worst of this sculpture in public is "software" that architects love because of its strictly unintrusive, light-weight effect. The best of it--David Smith's "Tanktotems", or Barnett Newman's "Broken Obelisk"--might refer to monuments of the past, but basically they stand as independent objects. They are involved in a language of form and space that has little to do with the plaza and generally seem only demeaned and belittled by being placed in this context.

The developments and investigations by artists in the sixties led to a greater concern with setting up a dialogue between object, space, and viewer. Many of the concerns of the minimalists and earthwork artists have informed current work, though most of those attitudes remained 'closed', that is self-reflective.

Minimal art was still usually seen in a museum or gallery context. While trying to undermine and negate the object qualities of sculpture and divest it of any of its referential content, the forms were often monolithic, continuing the tradition of sculpture as monolith. The work was authoritarian in nature, forcing the viewer to confront the sculpture and make sense of it; it was also inaccessible to the uninformed viewer.

An example of work being done in public spaces today that is an extension of this aesthetic is the work of Richard Serra. In some ways Serra's piece in New York's Foley Square continues the tradition of the monument. While investigating experiential qualities of space, it is a monolithic form that relies on its overwhelming physical presence.

Robert Morris, one of the earliest artists involved in the development of minimalist ideas, has continued as the analytic thinker, and outside commentator, always reflecting the shifts of ground within the discipline. His proposals for public

sculpture are often based on this role as outside observer involved in commentary rather than dialogue. The work he completed for a Seattle land reclamation project was a wry comment: Earthwork in the form of a strip mine--presumably just what many people in the land reclamation 'business' would be trying to get rid of.

Earthworks completed in the late sixties and early seventies began to develop and respond to the particular qualities of site, incorporating that information into the sculpture. They moved outside the usual art world context often into the vast spaces of the west. Though the images of these works (such as Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty") were often appealing to a larger audience, the pieces were not within the public domain. They were privately sponsored works on private land that were not readily accessible to the public. The artists themselves maintained many of the attitudes of the studio artist: there is still something gestural about Michael Heizer's "Double Negative"--using a bulldozer as a paintbrush on the vast scale of the desert. This work, like Smithson's, was perhaps better experienced through aerial photographs or film. The magnitude of the space was the main focus rather than its immediacy. There seems to be a connection with the nineteenth century romantic tradition of the American west in some of these pieces.

There are several sculptors who have met the public head-on. Christo's involvement of the media, millions of dollars and masses of people in his work "Running Fence" is one example; or Mark di Suvero's huge pivoted pieces that incorporate swings, moving chambers or bells. Another is Oldenburg, whose numerous overscale objects in plazas comment with wit on the public's need for recognizability in art while posing as traditional monuments. These artists have often captured the public's attention; sheer spectacle has established an awareness of sculpture as an active force. However, if given the choice in entertainment of art or a baseball game, art is going to come out

on the losing end. There is often a great hue and cry raised about the amount of money going towards a work of art, but few will complain about the ball players' salaries. It seems that public sculpture needs more 'function' (or integration) to maintain a truly public place for itself.

For architects, art is in the service of architecture--as the handmaiden. The art chosen by the best architects of our time is often second rate or reactionary considering the vision expressed in the buildings themselves. Frank Lloyd Wright chose the sculptor Richard Bock to do works for his buildings; those sculptures do not fare well with the passage of time. It seems ironic to see Georg Kolbe's "Dancer" placed in the corner of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion in photographs--a rather ambivalent image within that building. The artist is seen as a decorator in that tradition of the Medieval craftsman, making additions to buildings. But, unlike the decoration of the Middle Ages, the images, scale, materials of sculpture do not fit--the artwork lacks that total integration of form and context.

If you look at other existing public sculptures functioning in an urban environment, there are few examples that seem successful. At the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan there is a huge sculpture by Fritz Koenig. The plaza itself is a very inhuman space. And the work of Koenig is **successful only** in that it compounds the inhumanity of that space. At Lincoln Center you can see works done by David Smith, Chagall, Henry Moore but they seem totally ineffectual and overwhelmed in that setting, transcribed into guardians of high culture. George Segal made a work recently that was intended for a park in Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village. Its subject matter was to reflect the gay community's presence in that neighborhood. The neighborhood became outraged at the possibility of the sculpture being placed there; the gay community was offended because they felt the images were artificial stereotypes that

did not reflect their diversity. Another part of the community did not wish to have their park identified as a gay park. Here again we have the problem of conflicting goals or attitudes within a community.

How is art to be integrated into our culture? How can it be made accessible, appearing not only within the restricted zones of museums? Is it necessary for our definition of 'culture' to be so divided that such a gap exists between the popular culture of 14th Street or Central Park on a Sunday afternoon, and the 'official' culture of a Lincoln Center? What role can art have in the development of a built environment? Artists in the twentieth century have been working in a rather isolated situation, responding to certain developments within our society but having very little interaction with it. We are specialists working on what has come to be viewed as an arcane type of communication assumed not to be very appropriate to our society.

How can we respond to the autocratic architecture in our built environment? Can we provide some sort of physical or psychological relief, create intimate spaces in that context that are approachable? Can we introduce alternatives into our culture--reintroduce time for reflection or human scale?

Think about building structures that can be integrated into this context physically and visually (integrated--not just an afterthought). Alter the context by introducing transition zones from street to building (human scale); construct spaces where slow motion is possible. Give people the luxury of engagement not confrontation. Think of spaces/structures that would allow people to be the connectors between the open space-- parks, waterfronts--and the dense areas of midtown. Their ex-

perience of open space might change the character of the dense space.

Priorities: breathing space, human scale, first hand experience, focusing on the strong visual elements of the city.

It seems that these needs are recognized, are being addressed by the city's 'fringe culture', its street culture.

A vacant lot in Harlem has been carefully laid out with a series of paths, walkways, a small bridge. Next to this, a miniature red house, a pavilion with a front porch. People sitting on the small porch. They don't live there, just visit.

The graffiti artists working on street level. Those blank walls abutting the sidewalk take on a texture, pattern, depth. The dismal space of the subway is invaded by the florescent cars covered with personal signatures.

On 14th Street--the wide sidewalk on the south side of the street--racks of clothes, boxes, stands take up most of the space, offering another kind of transition between blank wall and sidewalk. It is impossible not to become engaged physically or visually.

There are also the gates (folded protectors) covering store fronts that have been wildly painted; at night you see them, during the day they roll up and disappear.

How to enter this situation?

There was a "Twilight Zone" story about a man who spent a great deal of time trying to figure out how he could walk through a brick wall. With all of his resources summoned, he stepped forward and actually walked into the wall--but there was a problem: it was not possible for him to come out on the

other side. He remained encased in that brick wall.

At times, as an artist interested in doing 'Public Art', working in the context of the built environment, I feel that I share something of the predicament of this character. As much interest as I may have, it is very difficult for an artist to find an access route in this culture to public situations.

Art must be experienced directly. The public today lives in a world animated by electronic communications (which perhaps dampens or discourages 'direct experience'). Meanwhile, the image of art as often conveyed through the media remains historical. It is something to be labelled and put away.

How can the current ideas of artists emerge within a media culture?

The media seems to represent a difficult time frame to the artist: it is immediate but always connected to the future. People's expectations are increasingly without limits; advertising, television are letting us know what we can have, can be, can do--always a step ahead with a new door to open. The potential developments promised (and given) are great. And our media-shaped society does have the asset of a strong visual orientation, well adapted to a multiplicity of signs. But there are problems as well.

Is a present tense of some complexity not possible? Are we unable to experience or recognize anything beyond its sign? Always ready to move ahead, we are being told what to desire and expect. Decisions are directed from the outside (media as control) and the envelopment of the individual increases (the disappearance of differences--deviant behavior is finally co-opted).

How to divert this gaze which focuses so constantly on a distant view, to an immediate time and space?

The importance of actual experience (as opposed to reproductions or simulations), needs already being recognized by 'fringe cultures', is difficult to establish today, in our current context. These spatial experiences, which are given little credibility, are often found historically in vernacular architecture, old cities, gardens, etc. My interest is in reintroducing them into our own built environment in a way that is appropriate for today, using the imagery and vocabulary of our current surroundings.

The development of my interest in public sculpture has been a gradual one. The earliest works done in the mid-sixties were small scale constructions that depended on their skeletal forms and common materials (screen, canvas, pipe) to form a content. The pieces were linear, lightweight, and non-monolithic, using as references the images of our everyday environment.

The sculptures expanded in scale as I began to work on outdoor projects. I placed them in open fields, on hillsides, and in rural settings in an attempt to avoid the limited situations usually offered for sculpture (plazas, concrete pedestals, the lawn around a building). The pieces were physically and visually integrated into the site, avoiding the image of sculpture as confined object or statue. Part of the impulse of this work was related to my experience as a child, of the landscape of the West. The free standing object (monolith) is easily overpowered in that environment. Miles of fencing or fields of oil rigs are modest elements against that extended horizon. I was also responding to the limitations of the gallery and museum world; it was difficult to gain access to these situations, and the work being accepted within that framework seemed confined, the scale and imagery heavily influenced by market demands.

In the early seventies I built a piece on the Battery Park landfill in lower Manhattan, one of the few large open spaces in the city (see Fig. 1). When you approached the site you could discern five equally spaced wood elements; the sculpture materialized only as the viewer walked to the front and saw the five concentric circles descending into the ground-- physical engagement was necessary to see the work and the importance of the viewer's involvement was emphasized.

Another piece done about this time was "Sunken Pool" in Greenwich, Connecticut (Fig. 2). It was in a densely wooded area. One had to cross a stream, walk through brambles and pines before coming to this structure which provided a very still, reflective pool within the dense growth. The progression of the viewer through these different areas was an important element of the sculpture. The imagery of "Sunken Pool" was taken from our built environment. I had become increasingly interested in construction sites, mines, power plants as sources of imagery. I think everyone is affected by the complex visual elements of their surroundings; I am interested in focusing on them. Our visual impulses are as strong now as they have been in the past; there is, for instance, the decorative impulse, the use of repetitive forms. It does not seem appropriate however, to return to historical forms-- elaborate plasterwork, carved rosettes, wrought iron work. Within our own environment there are equivalent forms of great complexity which artists or architects can use.

"Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys" was built for the Nassau County Museum in Long Island, N.Y. a few years later (Fig. 3-5). It was a complex on a four acre site with three tower-like structures, two earth mounds, and an underground courtyard. In order to see the work the viewer had to walk through the whole field. There were changes in scale in the actual sizes of the towers and inaccessible spaces in the underground structure; boundaries and our perceptions of distance were brought

into question as were the limits of illusion and reality. But it is up to the viewer to assemble these images, draw comparisons, structure this information.

During this time I became more aware of the public's attitude toward these pieces. In this work in Nassau County, or later, "Staged Gates" (Fig.6) in Dayton, Ohio, I saw that people would approach these structures with a great deal of interest: climb the towers, walk through the underground courtyard, sit on the platform of "Staged Gates". They became engaged with the sculptures. The physical involvement, the images, the integration of the work with the site (it looked as if it 'belonged' there) provided some level of accessibility. The problems seem to arise when something is set apart and called a sculpture. Then it is unacceptable because it does not fit with an image of 'statue' and it is not 'recognizable'. And in approaching these sites, there was a great complexity of information offered to me as an artist--historical, physical, cultural. Instead of working within a closed framework of increasingly limited references (galleries and museums), I could extend the formal issues of visual language to a broader context.

"Veiled Landscape" was done in Lake Placid, N.Y. for the 1980 Winter Olympics (Fig. 7-9). I built a viewing platform which focused on the Adirondack mountain landscape in the distance. As you continued walking beyond the platform down the hillside, your view was blocked by a curtain of posts--the landscape was 'behind bars'; as you proceed, there are further physical and visual barriers. Finally you arrive at the gateway (it had appeared very small in the platform view) which is twenty feet high and sixty feet wide. This frames a pathway that goes off into the distance. The whole structure is intended as an introduction to that landscape. In developing this work I looked to historical sources for information: the 'borrowed' landscape of the Japanese garden, the formal procession

through the landscape in Italian paintings or gardens. I am interested in how to reintroduce these historical ideas about space, place, scale within our own context.

In 1981, "Field Rotation" was built for Governor's State University outside Chicago (Fig. 10-12). The university is made up of a small complex of buildings in the middle of seven hundred acres of farm land. People arrive here and move from their cars to the buildings without ever going outside the parking lots. The surrounding land is a flat prairie with an open skyline in every direction. I wanted to find a way to take people outside the parking lot into the environment. It is similar to the idea at Lake Placid; I want to focus on surroundings that people take for granted.

From the parking lot you are able to see a large mound, a tower, and a series of posts cut off to a perfectly level plane that contrasts with the slight contouring of the land. As you approach the top of the mound you find a sunken court; there are ladders for entry into this irregularly shaped area which is fifty-six feet on a side and seven feet deep. Within this area are platform/walkways and a central well with a protruding ladder. Depending on the water level, the whole structure acts as a step well. The deep central well fills, as does the surrounding gridded area and the larger square. If you climb into the tallest tower you are aware of the posts in the field forming a spoke pattern radiating out from the central mound; the courtyard itself takes on the pattern of a pinwheel. Your perception of the piece changes as you move from ground level to the top of the mound to the elevation of the tower. I was interested in providing a reason to enter that environment but also once you get there, an area of intimacy or protection in that vast open landscape--a place to read or relax.

I left the built environment at an early point because of

the limited situations for sculpture. But the ideas that have developed in the sited works have brought me in a circle. With this information (importance of viewer, integration with site, use of architectural sources) I have developed new attitudes about how sculpture might be integrated into the city. There are many interesting possibilities suggested: building a work on one of the blank walls of the city (a three-dimensional relief you can enter), doing the scaffolding or protective walkway of a construction site, the 'awning' to the door of a building, a roof top 'garden', or a temporary celebratory facade of a building. The engagement of the public is part of the work's motivation.

Recently, I completed a proposal for a commission that will soon be built for the 42 Street Redevelopment Corporation (Fig. 13). It is located on a 20' x 60' lot on 42 Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues. I approached the development of this work as I do all of my pieces: photographing the site, measuring, looking at surrounding structures and images, trying to reflect elements within that environment. The final plan is for a series of walkways, a central circular structure and balcony area at the rear where you can look down on the preceding elements. The work is made of wire mesh and steel posts. From the street view you look into a densely structured space of some complexity. At night the work will be lit rather dramatically; the lighting and balconies relate to the setting within the theater district and the materials and density are reminiscent of construction sites, fascinating spaces in the city that you are allowed to observe from the sidewalk but never enter.

The idea of working on large scale works that are once again referential is being investigated by a number of contemporary artists: Nancy Holt, Alice Adams, George Trakas, Alice Aycock, Siah Armajani are a few.

But we have few precedents for non-figurative referential

work that is integrated into context. One person who has investigated this area is Isamu Noguchi; at the Unesco park in Paris he was responsible for creating a total environment-- the walls, walkways, benches.

These artists are interested in the way the viewer can be involved in the structures, rather than making objects that one just looks at. The works are less authoritarian in nature; they are no longer monolithic; they are accessible in their imagery, calling to mind bridges, courtyards, newsstands. The most important difference in attitude is that the artist is interested in attempting a dialogue with the public. The artists spend time going to Town Meetings, meeting with Planning Boards, entering into very practical, pragmatic situations. There is an effort being made to establish an accessible visual language.

How successful will this be? The artists' work and intentions go only halfway: once something is placed in public there is no way to program or predict the response. But the effort must be recognized and supported. Ways must be developed to fund these investigations. Artists should be brought in at the beginning of projects, whether the construction of a building or the beginning of an urban renewal project; there need to be artists included as members of planning groups. Their visual sensibility can provide some insight into our complex environment, possibly creating a pathway through it.