

Art and Context: A Personal View

Daria Dorosh

Abstract—The unification of art and context has been a motivating force in the author's work since 1980. She defines context as the relationship of art to its place, to its public and to a time. This philosophy has led her to consider the various hypotheses that inform her work, some of which include the primacy of site, accessibility of art to the public and art's position in the social and economic system of today.

I. INFLUENCE OF PLACE

New York City, where I live and work as an artist, has engendered the issues I address in my work, as well as its form, scale, medium and visual vocabulary. My history and development as an artist have been shaped by the process of working and exhibiting here. This history, in turn, is the foundation for directions that are still to be expressed. For me, the most exciting changes in my work have come from engagement and response to my particular environment.

Conversely, the experience of leaving the city periodically to continue my work in a different setting generated certain conflicts that made clear to me the connection between art and place. Many summers spent in southeastern Vermont helped me recognize that my paintings were rooted in a city experience. I used color for its properties of contrast and temperature rather than for its ability to evoke seasons or time of day. The imagery in my work, though abstract, had references to architectural form and electric light. I sometimes used fragments of the landscape for pattern but only after filtering nature through memory or the flatness of a photograph. To work on a 12-foot painting or drawing in my New York studio was exhilarating, but large work has specific space requirements as to where it can be made or viewed. I delighted in the intimate scale and clutter of the summer houses I rented, but I was troubled that the kind of painting I did in my city studio did not belong in them. Over the course of many Vermont summers, I began to wonder who was the audience for my work and where did my work belong once it left my studio. The

engrossing process of making a painting is reason enough to make art, yet I feel a responsibility to the finished work as well. I care about its existence and place in the world, even though I know that artists traditionally have little control over the future of their work. Eventually, these questions found their way into the work itself, stirred by the dissonance of working in a rural environment rather than in the one to which I had become accustomed.

I think that exhibiting in New York has a specific impact on how an artwork looks. With hundreds of galleries competing for an international art-viewing audience, it becomes paramount to produce a dynamic exhibition in order to have the work noticed. The neutral space

of the gallery is made for art that can make this setting come alive [1]. It is exciting to participate in a large-scale work that presses at the boundary of the gallery space, as does the sculpture of Richard Serra or the huge paint-encrusted canvases of Anselm Kiefer. By nature, exhibits are temporary events, performances, after which the artwork goes on to a more permanent location. With help from skilled dealers and the press, some artists' work finds its way into museum, private, or corporate collections, which can provide the kind of space this work requires. It is not meant for the modest living spaces or budgets of most people; the scale of the work has built into it a particular clientele and marketplace.

New York has many art worlds with

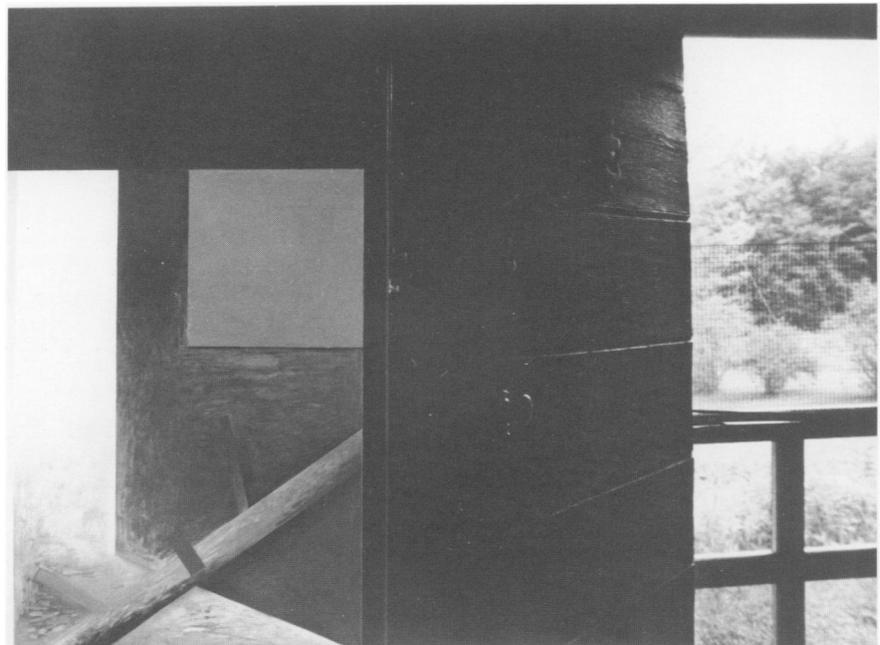


Fig. 1. *Twice Around*, oil and black-and-white photograph on Masonite, 40 × 60 in, 1981. (Collection of Health and Hospitals Corp., New York) Here, a doorway is the edge between three spaces. Two openings—one painted, one photographed—can be seen as exits from a dark interior. The two disparate modes of representation and illusion can connect only in the imagination of the viewer.

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many different audiences, yet little of the art that is produced here is intended to affect the quality of public life in the city. When I leave the context of the art circle—namely museums, galleries and art schools—there is little evidence that what I do as an artist really matters or even exists. Without the integration of art into everyday life, the public arena feels incomplete to me. Although numerous factors have made this situation what it is, I have determined to work toward the integration of art with place by incorporating my concerns in the artwork itself.

II. EARLY WORK AND INFLUENCES

I have had the opportunity to exhibit a body of work every 2 years since 1972, when I joined a group of women artists to

form a nonprofit art organization and gallery [2]. Complete freedom to follow the natural direction of my work without the pressures of the marketplace allowed my work to go through a personal evolutionary process. I first exhibited small semi-abstract watercolors—abbreviations of places I had visited. The clarity and immediacy of the medium held an attraction for me. My images were always frontal and became increasingly more abstract over several years, until I realized that the edge of pigment deposited between two areas of color as they met was becoming the essence of my painting.

By 1975, I wanted to bring a physical dimension to my work. Watercolor seemed too limited for what I needed to express. This led to a body of work of slim plaster

reliefs that were poured to a thickness of 1/4 inch and then carved and painted with watercolor. The theme of these works was a sense of the void as described in a creation chant of the Maori of New Zealand, which poetically evokes place on a universal scale.

In 1976, I felt the need to regain the expressiveness of color. To investigate how I perceived color I used a Polaroid camera to gather hundreds of fragments of light, color and place. The outcome of each photo could never be anticipated, and this kept me aesthetically involved. Each photo was a piece in a puzzle and needed to be integrated into a larger composition. Color photocopying was the next stage in the process and left its own signature on the Polaroid composites: it unified the collage surface, translated the color into a strange mechanical palette and left a wonderful tactile ridge, somewhat like the plaster reliefs I had been doing previously. The new color range I discovered for my next body of work was influenced by the color photocopy process. My colors now were electric and raw, sometimes deep and muddy, in the sense that many colors applied in layers of oil crayon were active in the same area. In these very physical and luminous works, my scale also changed to 5-foot-square works, and I was able to experience the new pleasure of being surrounded by the image I was making [3].

From 1978 to 1981, my work generally took the form of large drawings in oil crayon on muslin-backed paper. For the imagery, I used Polaroids of places, which I transformed by cutting, composing and photocopying them and then drawing from them. The compositions were frontal, relating to the edges of the picture plane; and the vertical and horizontal areas intersected, creating an illusion of depth [4]. During this time, I became increasingly aware that I could make these works only in my New York studio because of their large size and because I needed the distance from my source, nature, in order to restructure the photographic material freely.

III. CHALLENGING THE SEPARATION OF ART AND PLACE

In the summer of 1981, while in Vermont, I started a body of work in which I acknowledged my struggle with location. The resulting nine works were shown at A.I.R. Gallery in New York under the title "Paintings/Resistant Spaces: Paintings in Combination with Photographs and Chairs" [5]. Each work consisted of an abstract painting set into



Fig. 2. *Between*, oil on Masonite with chair, 48 × 48 × 24 in, 1981. The chair was chosen as the starting point for the painting. In combining art with object, I wanted to bring the painting into a relationship similar to that of objects in a room, where individual objects also participate in a collective identity.

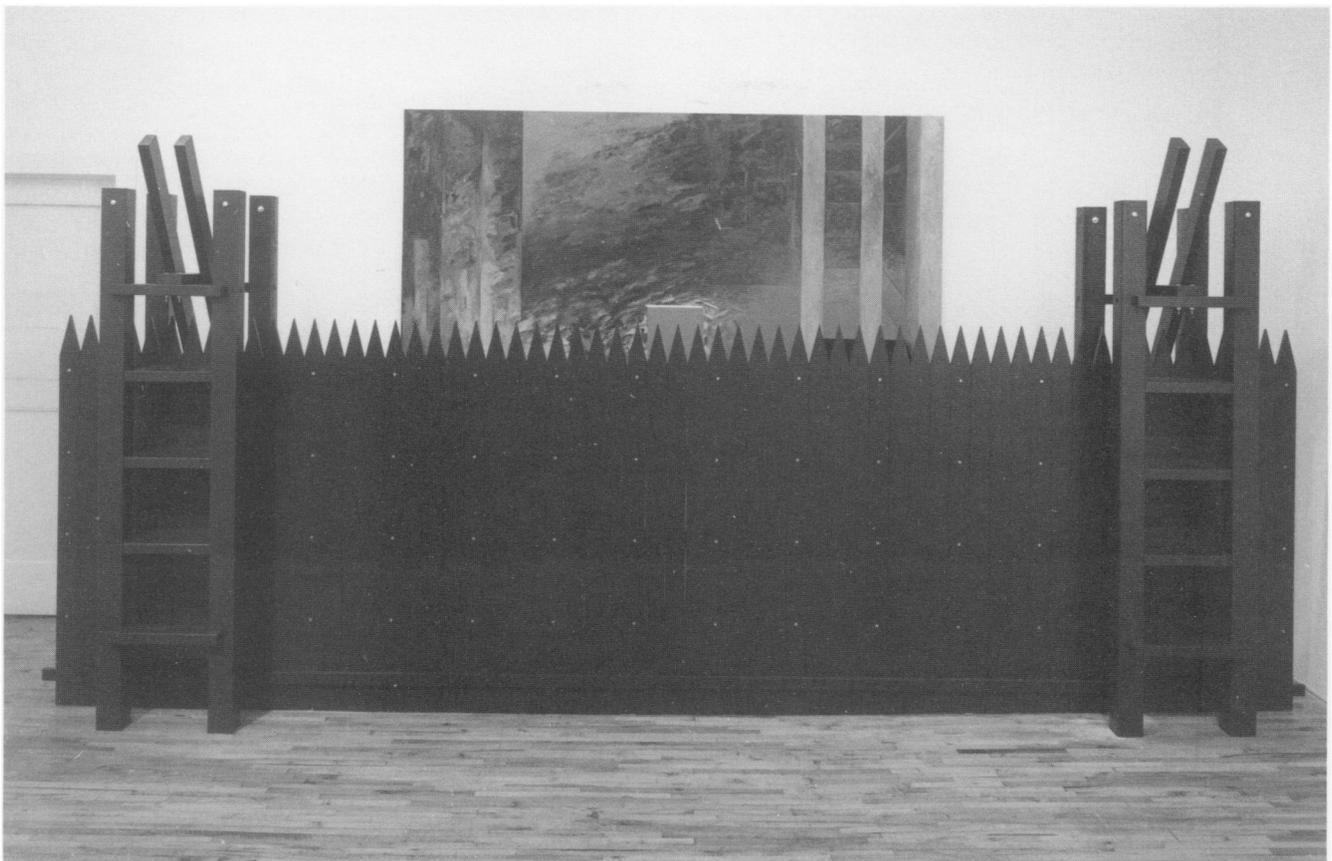


Fig. 3. Collaboration, 1984: Donna Robertson, *Fence*, wood, paint, hardware, 49 × 82 × 18 in (collection of the architect); Daria Dorosh, *Fence Painting*, oil on canvas, 46 × 96 in (collection of Mr. and Mrs. Zayac). Our intent was to create a sense of boundary or edge. From a distance, the fence acts as a barrier, preventing the viewer from seeing the entire painting; together, they are perceived as a unit. As one approaches the painting, it 'rises' and can be seen in its entirety. However, the painting as object is also a barrier in that the space suggested in the painting cannot be entered. (Photo: D. James Dee)

its own environment, which took the form either of a chair or of a large black-and-white photograph of a domestic interior.

In these works, furniture was used to make the work 'house scale', yet the work did not comply with what one might expect 'house art' or 'gallery art' to be. The chairs were not appropriated into the artwork as art objects, and the photographs acted not as art but as visual information around the painting. An equilibrium was maintained between the painting and the object so that neither became subordinated to the other; rather, the objects had to maintain their inherent nature in order to activate the painting in the composition. I gave each painting its own reference point, and thus the gallery was no longer the springboard for the work.

At the same time, my experience of the average domestic interior made me want to challenge the conventional manner in which art is displayed there. I envisioned making paintings for unexpected locations in houses, such as alongside windows and doorframes, rather than centered on a wall. I felt that a small work placed in

counterpoint with a room could stimulate a dramatic interaction between art and place. That summer, I took photographs in our rented house to extract images of windows, walls with doors and pieces of furniture and then had large black-and-white blow-ups made. I cut out a place on the wall in the photo and, after mounting the cut photograph on Masonite, I composed and painted an image in the open space (see Fig. 1).

The result was surprising. Two modes of representing reality, painting and photography, when locked into each other, manifested their differences and did not assume their usual roles. The photograph, usually representative of reality, showed its abstract side through its flat, non-tactile surface and cropped geometric form. It enveloped the painting, acting as a frame and taking it into its own image. In contrast, the painting, although abstract, seemed more real because of its painterly surface, luminous color, spatial illusion and architectural references to the interior in the photograph. I discovered that a dynamic relationship is created when two separate visual vocabularies operate as a unit.

In four of the works, I used the chair to achieve similar effects and to pull the space in the painting closer to the space in the room. Maintaining its function, the chair stood 6 inches in front of the painting (see Fig. 2). The painting relied on the structure of the chair as reference for its image; yet, because of the juxtaposition, new aspects of both objects surfaced. The household chair, with its particular history and characteristics, evoked the presence of the human figure and relegated the painting to the role of background in the composition. Obstructed by the chair, the painting became less of an icon; yet, because of its ability to 'activate' the chair, it became even more powerful.

The titles of these works, such as *Interstice*, *Twice Around* (Fig. 1), *Between* (Fig. 2) and *Margin*, were chosen to convey the essence of these interactions—namely, the transition between art and object, illusion and reality, abstraction and realism. I gave up the autonomy of the painting in these juxtapositions; yet, once I allowed art to come into being from this new vantage point, innumerable possibilities presented themselves for



Fig. 4. *Study for Intarsio Floor Surface*, lobby of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gouache and tapes on photograph, 9 × 12 in, 1984. I created this illusion of three-dimensional floorspace for the viewers looking down from the upper levels of the lobby. The activity of people-watching or waiting in a public space is heightened when art interacts with its surroundings.



Fig. 5. *Site Drawing, Quai St. Bernard, Paris*, on-site installation with tape and photo-documentation, 1985. This drawing was spontaneously composed for the site with tape to add a different spatial experience to the seating structure. As one moves around and within it, the forms shift and change.

exploration. The dialogue that was initiated between art and an aspect of place has affected the course of my work ever since.

In 1984, I decided to initiate a series of collaborations with architects for my next exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery [6]. The process of looking for architects willing to participate in a collaboration was instructive in itself. After several attempts, I found four architects with highly individual sensibilities who wanted to work collaboratively for an exhibition. I met with each of them initially to identify a shared point of reference for both painting and object. Subsequently, each collaborative unit developed in its own framework, giving me the opportunity to work on four different projects.

My premise was that a conscious relationship could be established between art and the built environment in which both were separate but equally necessary to each other. I wanted to know what the nature of collaboration was, what was important to preserve in a collaborative situation, and whether different points of view could coexist in one framework if the aesthetic domain were different. It was also important to me that all of us worked in a manner consistent with our individual concerns and that the work we produced for the show could function independently after the exhibition.

IV. FOUR COLLABORATIONS

The architect Mary Pechinski, with whom I share an interest in the city, designed a writing desk with storage spaces in the form of an urban skyline, which included a 'billboard' rectangle that could hold a 9-by-16-inch painting. Harriet Balaran and I decided to do a

light-hearted variation on the decorator's habit of matching a painting to a couch, except in this case the *Lounge on Four Spheres*—a black, lacquered-wood structure on bowling balls—was designed to 'match' a given painting. Elizabeth Diller and I addressed the conceptual theme of 'gravity—levity, vantage point—vanishing point' by juxtaposing her mirror assemblage and my painting. Although the two objects were next to each other, the contrasting way that mirror and painting manifest illusion held the two objects in a relationship of differences. Donna Robertson produced a brooding, dark green fence that evoked both a picket fence and a frontier stockade with towers. My large dark painting, created in the same outdoor mood, hung on the wall behind the fence, slightly obstructed, or protected, by the structure. Our mutual point of reference was the expression of boundary or edge (Fig. 3).

With this exhibition, I was able to devise a context for my paintings within the gallery space. Now I was ready to go further—to let go of the protective territory of the gallery and make work intended to be an integral and permanent part of a place. To do this, I had to identify place as both subject and context before I could begin to work.

V. THE CITY AS ARTIST'S STUDIO

I began to view New York City as a large open studio for site-specific work. Using the photograph again, I chose various public spaces—such as the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art (Fig. 4), the New York Convention Center, subway stations, parts of Broadway—and made drawings within them. It was exciting to

envision art on a grand scale in surroundings that had a ready-made audience. The floor surface in these places became the canvas on which I could weave an illusion of abstract forms under the feet of people traversing the space.

At the same time, I began researching and visiting public spaces built in past eras to help me define possibilities for the present. I found diverse cultural and historical models—for example, the gardens of China, which combine nature, art and spirit into one experience; urban parks such as the Buttes-Chaumont in Paris, which represents the aesthetics of nature re-created by man; and the urban public spaces of Italy, designed to encourage sociability and dramatic interaction among its residents. Looking at these and other examples, I began to define my personal criteria for public art.

First of all, I wanted to create work specifically for a site. Existing in the public realm, it would need to be incorporated into a functional surface or structure, such as the floor, wall or seating, rather than be an autonomous, contemplative art object. Its setting would render it vulnerable, thus requiring the use of appropriate durable, low-maintenance materials. It would have to be a permanent installation, showing a commitment from the community and allowing it the possibility of becoming part of an historical context. Furthermore, public art belongs to a large audience and must come about through a complex process that includes administrative assistance and financing. The artist must be willing to work with many groups and individuals who pool their skills and resources to bring the work to realization. Finally, I wanted to put art directly within the city

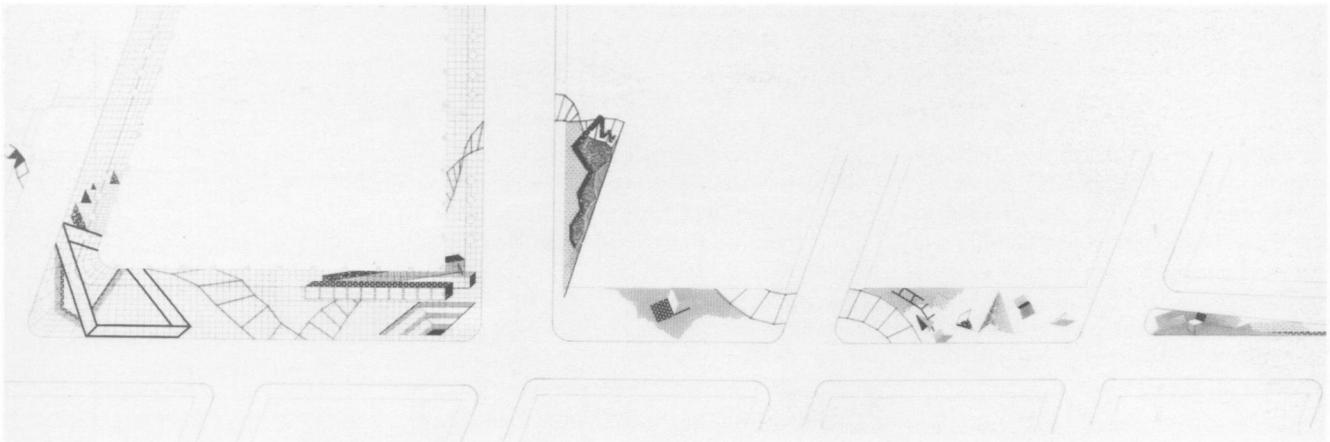


Fig. 6. *Urban Transformation*, drawing #2, ink and tapes on Mylar, 36 × 72 in, 1987. This line drawing is for Greenwich Street, from Barclay to Chambers Street, in Manhattan. The concept is to create an illusion of forms weaving under buildings and streets, to be perceived from the upper levels of surrounding buildings. This pattern will be expressed in various paving materials such as cement, granite, brick, marble and metal. Into this flat surface, street fixtures such as seating, lighting, and planted areas will be integrated to enliven the streetscape and provide smaller-scale areas to be enjoyed on the pedestrian level.

environment, to create a celebratory site in which art functions as place, even as it counters the sobriety of the city workplace through its nature as art.

My first drawing for a site-specific artwork for New York City was done in 1985 and titled *A Pedestrian Bridge for 57th Street between 5th and 6th Avenues* (Color Plate A No. 1). Most people, myself included, get to the galleries and stores located on both sides of this street by running through traffic mid-block to avoid going to the far corners to cross. I felt inspired to solve this problem aesthetically. I took many photographs of the street and chose a view that provided a dramatic setting for a pedestrian bridge. Using oil pastels on an enlarged photograph of the site, I composed a bridge of titled asymmetrical forms with surfaces flooded by colored lights. Since this area is reputed to be the center of contemporary art, it seemed fitting that the bridge be designed by an artist as a functional and aesthetic marker for the street.

The enormous gap between artistic vision and implementation has relegated this proposal to the conceptual realm. However, it set in motion a dialogue with city agencies, such as the New York City Department of Transportation, which continues to this day, and I discovered the complex mechanisms for putting anything permanent in a public space.

VI. EUROPEAN INFLUENCES

My growing interest in public art coincided with several summers spent teaching and travelling in France and Italy. This exposure made a significant impact on the formal direction of my work. Seeing art and architecture in their

historical and social setting revealed new dimensions in works I had known only through reproductions. I found the buildings in the countryside of France compelling in their dense, massive forms, where roof and wall became a continuous surface of stone in which occasional small openings for windows were unpredictably placed and often shuttered. This introspective quality seemed to belong to a particular time and location. Upon visiting Le Corbusier's *Chapelle de Notre Dame du Haut*, built in 1950 in Ronchamp, I could see its connection to this history of massive form, tactile surface and small windows opening to the outside world. Before seeing it in the context of French rural architecture, I had admired it as an abstract modern work alone.

This contact with France eventually turned my imagery inside out. I had been painting layers of abstract, open spaces receding from the edges of the picture plane; now my imagery began to resemble a dense self-contained object reminiscent of a diatom suspended in a colorful void. An equally important influence on my work at this time was the magnificently public-spirited architecture of Italy, with its generous entryways, dramatic use of stairs and decorative surfaces in fresco and stone. In the churches of Siena, Ravenna and Assisi, I saw the potential of marble and mosaic and the excellent opportunities that floors presented for embedded images.

VII. NEW DIRECTIONS

In 1985, a fusion of impressions became evident in my work. I began to work on marble and granite surfaces making drawings that simulated inlaid stone and metal in the shape of floating geometric forms. I continued drawing on

photographs of existing sites but also started a series of site-specific line drawings in actual locations. To continue my work while travelling in Europe, I used tape to 'draw' on architectural forms in public areas; I then photographed the image before removing the tape. One of these 'drawings' was done in Paris, on the *Quai St. Bernard*, along the Seine (Fig. 5). These temporary drawings allowed me to experience the effect of my two-dimensional configurations on an environmental scale. As a painter, I was excited to see the bonding of imaginary space with an existent functional surface.

I was eager to work on a permanent installation and had been gathering information on commissions through the '% for Art' programs around the country [7]. Public art programs have been attracting growing numbers of artists, particularly sculptors, who want to work on large-scale projects that are set up as collaborations with architects. In the early seventies, artists like Robert Smithson opened up the issue of site-specific art—earthworks—that moved out of the gallery space. I see public art today as another stage in this direction, but one that has its own characteristics. Any monumental work that strives to exist in the public arena, no matter how temporary, like the installations of Christo, requires funding and coordination on a grand scale. The artists actively working in this direction, such as Mary Miss, Elyn Zimmerman or Joyce Kozloff, work with teams of people, including program administrators, architects, engineers, contractors and lawyers, to bring a project to realization. During this process, the time frame or even the outcome is hard to predict. Robert Irwin writes about this in his book *Being and*

Circumstance [8]. One difference between 'earthworks' and public art is that the latter exists in a social or urban setting and must go through a process of evaluation and acceptance by its 'users', who also provide the funding and take responsibility for maintaining the work.

Although procedures for artists to apply for these projects have been in place for some time, I wondered if it were possible to initiate a public art project myself, as the next step necessary for the evolution of my work. I decided to bring together all my resources to find out.

VIII. TRAFFIC ISLAND TRANSFORMATION

I was attracted to a site in lower Manhattan that seemed to have the right characteristics for a successful public art project. The site, a painted traffic island at a 'T' intersection, was in the midst of a business area with an active pedestrian flow. It was on a broad street, spacious yet protected at this intersection by office buildings on three sides. The corporations around the site could serve as potential sources of funding for the project since it would be designed for their employees. I started with inquiries at the New York Department of Transportation to find out what I needed to do to take a design proposal through the city channels. Project funding was a key issue. Drawing on my experience with grants and organizational work as well as my extensive file on architects, I wrote a proposal to do a design study for this space [9]. The interdisciplinary design team I brought together included myself as artist and project coordinator, an architect whose special area of interest was street furniture, and a landscape architect who had a strong background in urban parks. We agreed to work collaboratively to arrive at a design concept; in addition, I would seek additional funds to exhibit our design to the business community and for possible realization of the project [10].

With sponsorship from a nonprofit organization, letters of support from the community and two advisors, I obtained funds to do a design study and we have been working on this project since 1986 [11].

Working collaboratively, our design team has researched the potential of the site and developed a plan for integrating art, architecture and landscaping. Our premise is to use various paving materials

and to treat the sidewalk as if it were a painted canvas on which a large-scale illusion of abstract forms is embedded. Street furniture and landscaping areas will be woven into the illusion to relate to the image or to act as counterpoint. To me, New York has always been a city of vertical views, whether looking up at the skyscrapers or downward from places like the World Trade Center, which is my favorite vantage point. The scale and illusion in my pavement 'painting' are made to be seen from the tops of buildings in the area. On the street level, it will function as an outdoor public space with seating, plantings and small-scale detailing in the materials for pedestrians to enjoy.

IX. CONCLUSION

The design study has led to a subsequent project titled *Urban Transformation* (Fig. 6). It exists in a time frame more familiar to architects and city planners than to artists. As I take it through procedures with city agencies, community groups and corporate boards, the project is continually moving closer to realization [12]. I am satisfied with the many new issues this endeavor required me to consider because my personal goals as an artist need to be realized in a social context. I am going outside the artworld boundaries to do my work because I want to contribute something I value to the built environment. For me, New York is a communal space, always in the process of being shaped by the people who live and work here. In the course of this pursuit, I have been affected and changed as well. My materials now include paving surfaces, such as cement, bricks and granite, as well as paint, and the scale of my work is flexible, from a watercolor to several city blocks. What remains constant, however, is the spirit evolving within my work as an artist; this remains the essence of what I have to contribute.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1986). The essays in this book originally appeared in *Artforum* magazine in 1976 in a somewhat different form.
2. A.I.R. Gallery was founded as an artists' cooperative to provide visibility for the work of women artists and to establish public programs to explore issues pertaining to art made by women. See

- Marcia Tucker, "By-passing the Gallery System", *Ms.* (February 1973) pp. 33-35.
3. Jeffrey Keeffe, review and photograph (*Untitled*, 1978, oil stick on paper), *Artforum* 16, No. 9, 65-66 (May 1978).
4. Thea Gutman, "Daria Dorosh", *Arts* 54, No. 6, 3 (February 1980).
5. Karen S. Chambers, "Daria Dorosh", *Arts* 56, No. 10, 7 (June 1982).
6. Patricia Phillips, "Daria Dorosh", *Artforum* (May 1984) p. 85.
7. The 'percent for art' legislations that have been passed by many states and cities stipulate that a designated percentage of the capital construction costs of city- or state-owned new constructions or major renovation projects must be allocated to the commission or purchase of artworks for those sites.
8. Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1985).
9. In 1985, the Design Arts program of the (U.S.) National Endowment for the Arts (N.E.A.) was interested in proposals for collaborative projects that identified place as art. Concerned that our country's public places were being designed by formula, the N.E.A. wanted to encourage fresh perspectives in this field. My own goals as an artist coincided with these issues, and I was able to test my ideas as a result of the N.E.A.'s financial support.
10. The architects Mary Pechinski and Lee Weintraub of Weintraub & Di Domenico are developing the street furniture and landscaping for the project. In addition, each of us participates in every phase of realizing our goals.
11. Visual Artists, Inc., a nonprofit organization, sponsored my grant request to the National Endowment for the Arts. Ekkehart Schwarz, Director of Design at the (U.S.) Department of Transportation, and Anthony Marra of Olympia & York acted as consultants for the project.
12. In 1987, under the sponsorship of Visual Artists, Inc., a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts (architecture, planning and design) was awarded to our design team to continue the project.

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- Harold Rosenberg, *Art on the Edge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) especially, "Criticism and Its Premises", pp. 135-152.
- Bernard Rudofsky, *Streets for People (A Primer for Americans)* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1969).



A

No. 1. Top. Daria Dorosh, *A Pedestrian Bridge for 57th Street Between 5th and 6th Avenues*, oil pastel and photograph on Mylar, 24 × 34 in, 1985. Having felt the need to cross this busy thoroughfare in the most direct way possible to get to galleries on both sides of the street, the artist sought, with this visualization, to combine art with function in the public realm.

No. 2. Bottom. Michael O'Rourke, final maquette for *Images of Ourselves—Diana*, painted aluminum, 15 × 18 × 10 in, 1986.

