



# Art in the Public Interest

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Arlene Raven

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## Introduction

Arlene Raven

*Photos and Photo Commentary by Robin Holland*

Public art isn't a hero on a horse anymore. The bronze memorial, the most enduring public art form of the past century, gave way to large-scale abstract sculpture that flooded the public domain in the United States when the National Endowment for the Arts launched its art-in-public-places program in the 1960s. Then an explosion of new forms in the 1980s—as diverse as street art, guerrilla theater, video, page art, billboards, protest actions and demonstrations, oral histories, dances, environments, posters, murals, paintings and sculpture—radically changed the face of contemporary public art. *Art in the Public Interest* is devoted to these most recent forms of public artistic expression and to the critical issues raised by them.

Activist and communitarian, art in the public interest extends the modes of expression of public art of the past several decades. The new public-spirited art can, as well, critique (through its own approach and intent) the uneasy relationship among public artworks, the public domain, and the public. But the intersection of art and social issues in recent public efforts also presents knotty critical problems. A number of essays in this volume ask questions and examine the effects of socially-conscious art. How, for example, can we separate the good intentions of artists from the value of their work? The invention of new genres and artists' collaborations with nonartists seem, in addition, to defy existing standards. Since the audience for art cannot be quantified, measuring the achievement of these works even on their own terms remains difficult.

Does art that wants to do good do good? Is it fair to expect such work to be social work as well as art work? And does art in the public

interest really interest the public? As art critic Lucy Lippard states in "Moving Targets/Moving Out," "The great and still elusive questions surrounding public art are: Which public? Is there an exchange between art and audience?" In "Public Art from Public Sector Perspective," Wendy Feuer presents the question from the point of view of the art agency: "Should a state agency that serves such a broad spectrum of the population sponsor work that is esoteric, confrontational, or politically—or sexually—controversial? Is this type of work appropriate in an already overly stimulated environment?" Phyllis Rosser points out (in "Education through Collaboration Saves Lives") that the work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S., collaborative art projects that started in a Bronx classroom, is now represented by a SoHo gallery and sold at high prices. Can an art in the interest of the public be commissioned by corporations, funded by the government and sold in the art market?

Art historian Moira Roth chronicles performance artist Suzanne Lacy's spectacles in "Suzanne Lacy: Social Reformer and Witch." Lacy organized over four hundred black-clothed elderly women into a living *Crystal Quilt* in the glass-covered courtyard of a Phillip Johnson building in downtown Minneapolis in the spring of 1987. Several years of planning, funding, and organizing went into the afternoon performance. To what extent is Lacy responsible for what happens to her performers after the performance? Roth's article details the philosophy and planning process that separate Lacy's work from some spectacles. Still, such questions are appropriate, and Lacy herself asks them. Can artists work for the public by creating expensive productions—organized by elitist cultural institutions, seen by very small audiences, and finally chronicled as the latest feats of the artist? Are such artists merely ambitious media hogs? Lacy, in "Fractured Space," considers problems in producing public artworks with a strong accent on audience and community. She asserts that "Works of public art enter a pre-existing physical and social organization. How the work relates to, reinforces or contends with forms of expression of that community is a question that contributes to the critical dialogue."

The eighteen essays in this book neither dismiss art in the public interest as a subcategory of "real Art" nor offer only a sentimental advocacy. Instead, authors create a dialogue between respect for and even championship of an art that addresses the public interest in public and intellectual frameworks that can set these works into cultural contexts as well as critical perspectives. This dialogue is crucial not only for the future of public art itself but in the ongoing discourse among art, artist, audience, and society.

Writer/performer Linda Burnham's "Monuments in the Heart" chronicles performance and video experiments in community art since





## **WINDOWS**

Most of New York City's windows showing art ("Windows on White," those at Franklin Furnace, the New Museum, Grey Art Gallery, etc.) are actual windows. But "10 on Eighty" (Eighth Avenue between 53rd and 54th Streets) is a series of showcases stuck into the ground-level west wall of the Municipal Garage, built in 1960 from plans by an architect with a fifties hangover. The shows change every two to four weeks. The installation in the photo, the "Alluvium Collectors," was done by BAT, an artists' group.

*(All photos in this chapter are copyright Robin Holland)*

1980. During the past decade, Burnham explains, community artists have been working all over America in unlikely grassroots territories from Alaska to the San Diego border to New York harbor. Their mission—creating their work in the public interest—has led them to aspire to reveal the plight and plead the case of the disenfranchised and disadvantaged, and to embody what they view as humanitarian values. A majority of the artists whose works are examined by Burnham (and, in fact, by this volume as a whole) came of age in the idealistic era of social protest of the 1960s. They were educated in the experimental seventies, when nontraditional approaches and media began to be widely taught in art schools. Awash in the permissive postmodern eighties, those who chose to work in public already understood that inventing forms and structures didn't mean searching for novel painting shapes—and that traditional arts could be put to new use in the public interest. Burnham claims that community artists' experiments in performance and video since 1980 have stretched the definition of community art "the way they stretched the definition of fine art in the seventies."

But the new forms of community art we see in the 1980s are defined even more by their methods than by their media. Artists who finally created groups with other artists and nonartists to carry out their projects first longed for communities that could enfold them, and an inclusive, experiential art. Working on site in small locales, clowns and puppeteers, shamans and laundry experts, directors, needleworkers, and trouble-shooters—artists all—they intended to create a parochial art in its best sense, an artistry that serves the territory of specific spiritual assemblies. Those incarcerated in prisons and hospitals; the elderly and teenagers; the displaced, homeless and unemployed; peace, healing, and labor organizations; race and gender-based groups became participating audiences and artistic collaborators.

Artists working in the public interest address a wide range of human concerns. Performance artist Rachel Rosenthal rejected toxic waste and embraced the animals and vegetables of the earth; Sisters of Survival artists collective renounced nuclear arms and swore allegiance to world peace; theater director Susan Franklin Tanner (TheatreWorkers Project) and The Waitresses performance group struck for wages, jobs, and freedom from harassment in the workplace; artist Charles Dennis (Hospital Audiences) hunted down medical malfeasance and searched for real healing. (See Burnham, "Monuments in the Heart.")

Artist John Malpede, a California Arts Council artist-in-residence in the Artists in Communities program, and individuals among the homeless of Los Angeles' skid row, have been performing original



### COMMUNITY MURALS AND MEALS

"The Struggle Continues/*La Lucha Continua*" project, organized by Artmakers, created 24 murals in an open space in New York City running between 8th and 9th Streets at Avenue C. In September 1987, on the 9th Street side, Kalif Beacon, for whom sixties style—and, more important, sixties idealism—never became unfashionable, opened the Temple of the Rainbow soup kitchen. The food is prepared under a wooden awning, in 20-gallon pots set on a metal grating over open fires. Up to 1000 meals ("as much as anyone wants") are served each day. Contributions of money, food, paper goods, and time are welcomed.



### **GRAFFITI, SORT OF**

The art world's delight in graffiti is ostensibly over, but judging by its continued proliferation on all suitable surfaces, the writers have not lost interest. In Prospect Park, New York City, a Haitian artist, Deenpa Bazile, carved faces in a tree stump. This is three-dimensional work, but it has the same immediacy and anonymity as two-dimensional versions. A park administrator spent a year tacking business cards to the stump before she made contact with the artist and commissioned a piece for "Branches: Artists Work with the Trees," at the Boathouse (30 April–4 July 1988).

theater works about their lives as the Los Angeles Poverty Department. (See Burnham, "Hands across Skid Row: John Malpede's Performance Workshop for the Homeless of L.A.") During the previous decade in Los Angeles, muralist Judy Baca created the Citywide Mural Project and art-directed a multi-ethnic crew of hundreds of youngsters and local artists in painting The Great Wall of Los Angeles, a redesignation of Mexican-American history and the longest mural in the world, in a flood control canal in the San Fernando Valley. (See Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "A New Artistic Continent.") Art collaborators Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison's ecology-minded "Cruciform Tunnel"—an idea, then a proposal, arrived at through the Harrisons' Socratic dialogue, their model for discourse and method for developing their work—sought to rejoin two nature reserves in San Diego, California. (See Raven, "Two Lines of Sight and an Unexpected Connection: Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison.") On the San Diego-Tijuana border, Gómez-Peña and the Border Arts Workshop have been striking a blow at Mexican-American myths and stereotypes originating at the geographical dividing line between Mexico and the United States, and redesigning the "artistic continent" of Chicano art. As "Mobile Image," according to Steven Durland in "Defining the Image as Place," Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz created *Hole-in-Space: A Public Communications Sculpture* in 1980—a three-day, life-size, unannounced live satellite link allowing spontaneous interaction between the public on two coasts. Their use of satellite telecommunications allows "Mobile Image" to redefine the image as a real place that becomes the visual architecture for a live performance, the artist as a "metadesigner" who creates a context into which aesthetic and human content can enter.

Painter Eva Cockcroft chronicles the process of creating the La Lucha mural project she directed in New York City (twenty-six murals combining individual and collective works on four buildings surrounding a central plaza on New York's Lower East Side, addressing themes of intervention in Central America, apartheid in South Africa, and gentrification in the local community). Mierle Ukeles has shaken the hand of every sanitation worker in that city, and designed a waste facility on the Hudson, during her ten-year partnership with the New York City Sanitation Department. (See Burnham, "Monuments.") Greenpeace unfurled a banner on the infamous New York City garbage barge in 1987: "NEXT TIME . . . TRY RECYCLING." Jeff Weinstein's "Names Carried into the Future: An AIDS Quilt Unfolds" takes a personal, experiential approach to The AIDS NAMES Project Quilt when the Quilt traveled to



## MONUMENTS

In a city full of green horses and heroes (historical and winged) perched on pedestals and buildings, Michele Cohen, coauthor with Margot Gayle of *The Art Commission and Municipal Art Society Guide to Manhattan's Outdoor Sculpture* (June 1988), points to Augustus Saint-Gauden's collaboration with Stanford White, the Farragut Monument in Madison Square Park, as one of the finest. The Parks Department recommends John Hemingway Duncan's granite Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch at the entrance to Prospect Park in Brooklyn, with its three bronze groups by Fredrick W. MacMonnies and bronze reliefs by Thomas Eakins and William R. O'Donovan (*above*). The arch was completed in 1892 and its interior closed to the public until Prospect Park administrator Tupper W. Thomas invited the public in 1981. During June 1988 a six-person show called "Remember My Face," organized by Prospect Park arts coordinator Mariella Bisson, filled the arch's trophy room and each of the landings, reached by climbing one of the two decorated metal staircases that spiral to the top. Shown in the detail (*right*) is Gabriel Koren's *Self-Portrait 1, 2 & 3*. In the Anchorage (of the Brooklyn Bridge), another space that competes with its art for attention, an eight-artist show coordinated by Creative Time was also exhibited in June 1988.





New York. Originating in San Francisco, this monumental commemoration will (via television and travel to various U.S. locations) eventually be seen by a majority of U.S. citizens.

By defining their individual and cultural identities as well as producing end products, these collaborators and audiences are neither consumers of the works produced nor merely protestors of the wrongs they might want to right. Their creative process catalyzes reclamation and repossession of self, action in art/work and the building of community.

American history is full of artful images. Consider the dramatic, symbolic performance that inspired protestors created when they crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1620 in a lone vessel to form an ideal nation based on liberty and justice. More than one hundred years of community pageants and union marches—which merged diverse visual forms and involved large groups of artists and nonartists to confront pressing issues of the day—have provided sources and inspirations for current interdisciplinary spectacles, from Rachel Rosenthal's parade of animals to Sisters of Survival's marching nuns.

But public art still brings to the minds of many Americans an equestrian statue. In the United States, where "natural resources" can be code for patriotism and religion, outdoor sculpture has been traditionally associated with the large-scale "landscape gardening" of city parks (a movement inaugurated with Frederick Law Olmsted's creation of New York's Central Park in the late nineteenth century) as well as with city centers.

The individualistic conventions of twentieth-century modernism in the fine arts, including large-scale public sculpture, may not seem relevant to public interest. But, historically, there have been artists and movements that claimed to integrate aesthetic and social considerations and to serve their societies in some specific way. For example, the Russian Constructivists, artists working within the Russian Revolution in the beginning of the twentieth century and later at the German Bauhaus, provided a model of artists and art connected to their political contexts and to social change. Today in the U.S.A., however, art historian/critic Donald Kuspit cautions in "Crowding the Picture: Notes on American Activist Art Today" that activist art calling for social change may offer, instead, a new myth of conformity, "the same old lonely crowd in new ideological clothing." The complications and contradictions inherent in the intermixture of aesthetics and social issues, individual creative goals and outreach to audiences can be a clue to the troubling reception of American public and activist art in the past several decades.



Two periods in twentieth-century American history provided the conditions for a rise in the community arts. During the 1930s, and again in the late sixties and seventies, the desire for social change spawned public programs. Activity in the thirties, mainly New Deal employment for Depression-era artists, was centralized in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Treasury Section Art Programs. WPA easel and mural projects have left a legacy in contemporary two-dimensional public forms.

But public art changed altogether after 1966, when the National Endowment for the Arts' Visual Arts Program began its exploration of how to support the placement of art in public. The U.S. General Services Administration's Art in Architecture Program, inspired by a 1962 Kennedy administration directive fully activated in 1972, commissioned and paid for hundreds of sculptures for public places. In 1966, only a few public art programs existed in the United States, but in 1988 there were more than 135 funded state and local programs, as well as numerous efforts in the private sector. Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York, owns 115 large-scale modern and contemporary sculptures, displayed outdoors on its 400 privately purchased acres. On the C. W. Post campus of Long Island University a provocative Public Art Program has placed fifty-one pieces by forty-four artists (who loan the works long term) since 1985. First Bank of Minneapolis has challenged its employees and customers by placing controversial contemporary artworks in their workplaces. The Endowment itself has lent federal support to more than five hundred projects originating at the local and state levels since 1967. These have been located in every region of the country and in communities of all sizes (according to acting director of the Visual Arts Program Michael Faubion) "from Fargo, North Dakota to New York City," and ranged from "modest murals in city council chambers to monumental earthworks in reclaimed strip mines."<sup>1</sup>

Originally, the NEA's aim was to honor America's great artists. When Grand Rapids, Michigan, was awarded the first NEA Art-in-Public-Places Project grant, the city commissioned Alexander Calder's well-known *La Grande Vitesse*. But commissioning a sculpture for a city's public square now seems, even to the Endowment, artistically and politically naive as well as possibly imperious.<sup>2</sup> The "plunk" theory—a site is secured and a sculpture installed, thereby making it accessible to the masses—according to Suzanne Lacy, has given way to the more recent "chat them up" procedure: artists try their models out on the community, work with architects and city planners, and are somewhat receptive to public feedback, as long as artistic expression is not com-