

SITES AND SOLUTIONS: RECENT PUBLIC ART

Gallery 400/University of Illinois at Chicago
400 S. Peoria St., 312/996-6114

The models, photographs, and drawings in this show documented a public art very different in appearance and purpose from the kind of monumental modern sculpture we are accustomed to calling "public art." When a formalist sculpture is taken out of the gallery and placed in a plaza or lobby, it seldom looks quite right. Such sculptures can seem to invade our space for no good reason. They are recognizable as art because of their non-function, their high-lighted location, and sometimes, their awkwardness.

But the public art works documented here are generically different from gallery art. They were specifically created for public spaces, and they inhabit these spaces in such an innocuous way that they may not always be discernible, let alone be discernible as art. Yet this passive presentation is meant to dig deep into the public's consciousness.

Certainly, Richard Haas's trompe l'oeil murals (documented here by full-color scale drawings) are meant to blend in with the environment. But once recognized, these illusionistic architectural facades first delight, then impart a little lesson in architectural history. Joyce Kozloff's ceramic tiles for the vestibule of the Wilmington, Delaware train station (documented by drawings, a model, a sketchbook, and a tile) also recall art history: her designs hark back to Islamic decoration and the Arts and Crafts Movement. Yet, Kozloff's beautiful tiles are somewhat one-dimensional: they lack the self-consciousness which distinguishes modern art from modern craft.

Kozloff's tiles best exemplify a purely decorative role for public art. In contrast, Harriet Feigenbaum's plan for reclaiming a Pennsylvania stripmine aims to edify—by setting up a kind of moral example. Her *Dickson City Land Waves* (documented by drawings and statements) proposes to beautify the ugly, wasted land by methodically planting a vineyard, a pine forest, and a black walnut forest. Someday, the gently curving rows of growth could be either richly inspiring... or completely unnoticeable.

Filmmaker Bill Brand's *Masstransiscope* (documented by a model and videotapes) aims to entertain. Brand painted a sequence of simple forms on the wall of a New York subway tunnel and devised a system of placement and lighting so that, viewed from the moving train, the animated forms seem to burst and twirl—a harmless and joyful show.

Also entertaining and humorous—but with some weighty undertones—are the *Messages to the Public*: 30 second spots by various artists, flashed on the Times Square Spectacolor lightboard (documented by photographs and a videotape). Though some messages are merely delightful, others ominously warn the public to BEWARE. In this case, the guise of non-art makes the art all the more effective.

John Ahearn visits black and Hispanic neighborhoods and makes live plaster casts of selected inhabitants. He then paints them and hangs them on outside building walls—as well as inside gallery walls. The resulting sculpture is both crude and striking (documented by one sculpture, photos of the casting process, and a videotape). This work aims to develop community pride and solidarity. But there is also

a hint of voyeurism—on both Ahearn's part and our own.

Two of the strongest works in the show—at least by the evidence of their documentation—were those by Robert Irwin and Christo. Irwin's *Nine Spaces, Nine Trees* is beautifully subtle, while Christo's *Surrounded Islands* is brave and invigorating (both were documented by drawings and photographs). Irwin designed a simple, minimal outdoor space in Seattle. A grid of chain link fencing forms nine squares; within each square is a tree and a place to sit. But the pathway through the grid makes each square slightly different. Here, the minimal becomes slightly, but naturally, organic. In his project, Christo surrounded eleven islands in Biscayne Bay of Greater Miami, Florida with 6.5 million square feet of a strikingly unnatural pink-polypropylene fabric. Christo's crazy project becomes a metaphor for the way we build our cities and our lives—sometimes extending a structure precariously over the sea.

Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veteran's Memorial* (documented by a scale model, drawings, and photographs) is the most well-known and perhaps the most successful work in the show. To design a memorial is a rather traditional assignment, but the way Lin's design combines meaning, elegance, and contemporaneity exemplifies the best qualities of a trend towards more individual, site-specific, and humble public art which is still in its pioneering stage.

Sites and Solutions was organized by Judith Tannenbaum, director of the Freedman Gallery at Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania.

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