Evidence of Absence

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in New York City

Summer Sculpture 2003

What a difference a year makes. A summer ago, in a freshly restored park beside the Brooklyn Bridge, sculpture returned like a promise of renewal. Facing lower Manhattan, it pointed outward and upward to empty spaces in the sky.

This year, summer sculpture in New York has its nose to the ground, as if to find a place for what remains. "Between the Bridges" gets scrappier in both senses—more fragmentary, like the materials of its art, and yet more determined to survive. It comes as a relief in an otherwise dreary summer outdoors in Queens, in Madison Square Park, and at the Met.

Yard sale

Summers always mean watching and waiting. By late July, even art manages to sneak outdoors and to get some sun. Critics, too, may take a break from the serious stuff, trying ever so hard not to anticipate busier times ahead. So perhaps I was simply imagining it, but in 2002 anticipation came with added urgency.

A bitter first anniversary was approaching in September, and art and the city had recovery on their mind. Lower Manhattan was speculating on reconstruction. Just a few blocks away, a park along the Hudson was taking shape at last. Lanes for bicycling, skating, and running already extend all the way from the Battery into Harlem. Downtown was picking up memorials faster than souvenir stands, including Brian Tolle's forlorn hilltop honoring the Irish Potato Famine.

Out in Brooklyn, in Empire Fulton-Ferry State Park, one naturally spotted echoes of the Twin Towers, part of art's intimations of disaster. Sculpture sprang up awkwardly last year, in wooden crates and on narrow poles, as if unsure whether it could stay. Photographic collage and paired structures made the reference explicit. It did not necessarily speak of anger or pain. Like a good New Yorker, art kept its sense of humor. And like the bridge above, it often reached for the sky.

A year later, memories are bound to feel different, more like a permanent feature of the landscape. Now war feels much the same. George W. Bush has taken his promises and the money elsewhere. Designs for the Trade Center site have had to endure public competition, political dealing, and tension between the architect and real-estate developer. Even Tolle's monument is falling apart, while he graciously blames his landscape architect, and artists such as M. Meshulam and Sue Coe will keep returning

to the subject for some time to come. How can summer sculpture do better than to run in place, when so much else announces more of the same?

In Madison Square Park and at the entrance to Central Park, across from the Plaza Hotel, Wim Delvoye turns images of reconstruction into art's business as usual. He fashions traffic cones and a large steam shovel from his trademark Gothic filigrees, with a fine patina of rusted steel. If he means to turn urban destruction into kitsch, I have a t-shirt he might want to buy. Roy Lichtenstein uses the Met's roof garden for his most routine work yet, too. When he paints, Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* can look glorious. As sculpture, they and a cheery, one-story frame house have a severe case of the cutes.

Like that house, Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens also takes suburban nostalgia for this summer's theme. Pretend grass, pools, lawn ornaments, and vistas reflect on the whole concept of a park. "Yard" could take on special poignancy, across from an abandoned mental institution and around the corner from factories, like a microcosm of an entire metropolitan area. With its utter lack of irony, the work instead looks out of touch. I smiled as I climbed over a plastic yard by Venske and Spänle, and the pine scent of car-freshener leaves from Rosemarie Fiore took me by surprise. Still, laughter came and went all too quickly.

Back to square one

Summer sculpture in Dumbo runs only a few days past 9/11. Last year, that placed art on the eve of a tense first anniversary. As with war and the suburban images that I have described, people may focus more now on evasion and escape. Can art look to Ground Zero now, when so much else has gone back to square one?

The Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition is sure not giving up—a good omen for the Brooklyn Museum's forthcoming new entryway and "Open House" for artists working in Brooklyn—not to mention for quieter summers to come and the "Homeland Security Garden" or "Relative Environment" of the future. "Between the Bridges" gathers nearly thirty artists for 2003. Strangely enough, I did not once spot an echo of the Twin Towers. In fact, from the moment I entered, a more decorous and familiar skyscraper caught my eye.

Matt Johnson's miniature *Empire State Building* stands along the water's edge. From the park entrance, it draws the eye in roughly the right direction, more or less toward the real thing. It could serve as proof that some things survive, including visionary architecture. However, Johnson cobbles his tower together from irregular metal bars, its bolts and black braces in plain sight. Its outlines may evoke the elegance of 1931 Manhattan, its brown steel Minimalism's weightier perfection. In practice, however, one feels thrown back on something more primitive.

Repeatedly, works in Dumbo look less symmetric as one gets close—and less reassuring as well. Repeatedly, too, art seems forced to reconstruct public sculpture and the urban fabric from materials hardly up to the job. As in a sci-fi dystopia, sculpture falls back on something before modern technology, much less 9/11. At the same time, it cannot get the patterns of the city out of its mind.

Often, that means looking to the ground in place of the sky. Stuart Nicholson lays down some badly battered doors and calls it a *Sail*. William Zingaro's *Urban Landscape #6* amounts to slight ripples in an unassuming metal tile. Somewhat richer in form and associations, Matthew Weber's six I-beams consist not even of steel. Their sharply hewn wood suggests a man alone with only an axe.

Some artists seem determined to restore nature or humanity after a disaster. Next to her bench of loose branches, Ana Golci exhibits a tree—its roots gnarled and spreading, its

trunk abruptly cut off. If the bench sprung from that tree, it looks that much more fragile, harsh, and inviting. *Gnosis*, by Renee Iacone and Trudy Solin, has a ponderous title, not to mention an obvious derivation from Magdelena Abakanovich. Besides, one hesitates to interpret anything that calls itself gnomic. Still, the torsos, spattered with paint and straw, make an impact.

Wait until last year

Bones dangle just as menacingly from Ursula Clark's makeshift tree. She calls it *Archeological Rhythm*, with only a trace of irony in either word. I wondered if art like this will last out a heavy rain, much less two more months or a more lasting future.

Ready for an aspirin—or something stronger? Critical conventions require labeling big group shows uneven, so let me be the first to do so. Surprisingly, however, this show mostly keeps its edge and its sense of humor. Most of these reconstructions, if unstable, have nothing dour about them. Save the platitudes for last year.

Roger Stevens's *East River Spring* sports its bright enamel. The light blue pole shoots up from pebbles at its base, sprouting its wire streams every which way. Alistair Noble's screen doors fan out broadly, like cables of the bridge above. He also pays tribute to early Modernism's idealism. His title refers to V. V. Mayakovksy, the Russian poet. The wire screens give his black painted rectangles a translucency like that of Suprematism and Constructivism as well.

Other artists embrace the simple elements of Minimalism, without the constraining logic. Robert Winkler starts with hinged units of light wood, like a child's toy. They lead to towering, interlocking curves. Similar small components, but of painted metal, give Kasia Payadavous her large, prostrate human figure. David Poppie's title, *Entropy*, too, may allude to Minimalist dogma as much as to the chaos of the present. His three black columns sway and dance, not unreasonable given that they look like piles of LPs.

Actually, the puns get most explicit when it comes to politics, and one sees the backdrop of terrorism and war all over the place. Payadavous represents a Muslim's daily prayers, but the figure could just as well have staggered and fallen to the ground. Margaret Roelke seals her *Fortified Home* in plastic and duct tape. Perhaps the joke has already dated. I did not even get it at first. That alone, however, makes the display worthwhile.

Mike Ritchie gives politicians a *Podium*, with another long train of light wood. They better be willing to stumble while speaking, however, for the jagged, wooden stairs run horizontally. Nicolae Golici also picks up the framework of wooden units, for a tube that bulges gently in and out, like a cross between a wave, a playground setting, or something through which to crawl on marine drill. It looks harder still to pin down once one catches the title, *History Repeats Itself*. Under these circumstances, almost anything can start to sound political. Maybe I am imagining it, but Winkler's curves look like huge dollar signs.

Getting closer

Suffering and memory are not going away fast. Richard Brachman's tower of black steel drums alludes to urban industry, Middle Eastern oil, and *The Drums of War*. On the end of each drum, Brachman stretches fabric as on a musical instrument. There he hand letters quotes about war from Chairman Mao, Julius Caesar, and more of the usual suspects.

He, along with Clark, also acts as the show's curator. Obviously their artists are not yet ready to relinquish their anger or unease. The pun on Brachman's drums helps relieve

the painfully obvious, and some quotes feel prescient indeed. Take Karl Krauss, just for one: "Diplomats tell lies to journalists and then believe what they read." Talk about weapons of mass destruction.

Still, the show may work best by keeping fixed memorials at bay, just as some of the best artistic protests against the red menace left its tyranny unrepresented. I appreciated how the open structures and layered jokes defer the permanence of structure and judgment. Brachman's, unfortunately, may work best at a distance. Yet I liked how often the works change as one gets closer. They can leave one in suspense between admiration, laughter, and terror.

Miggy Buck's cross, star, and crescent have stick-figure arms and legs. About the size of children, they kick up their feet and join hands. I saw first a comforting image of three religions overcoming their differences. Then I saw the title, *Victory Dance*, and the dreadful certainties of hatred and war returned. The cartoon now started to look different as well, one more sign of my culture's global presence. Then again, maybe cartoons simply remind one to keep a child's sense of humor alive amid rather childish adults.

I shall remember, too, in the summers ahead and with quieter summer shows a sadder image. Steven Dolbin returns again to the ground, with a flat, lumpy rectangle of concrete or plaster. Its hollow cavity could represent a man or a woman. The figure could have left a vacancy by falling or by vanishing. The bent shape could imply introspection or pain.

Dolbin calls it *Perception of Absence*. His title could stand for the entire show—or for art after 9/11 for Isa Genzken—in its blend of listening to insistent voices, anticipation, and memory. If the title seems right for New York, meanings *always* point to something else anyhow. (The same title could apply to "September 11," on the tenth anniversary of 9/11.) No wonder art has a way of erasing its own certainties.

Carelessness and connections

Modernism has always known representation as a mark of absence, from Picasso's *Three Musicians* and their masks. Minimalism, too, knows absence, when it implicates the entire space in the work of art. Today, however, late Modernism has become a fixed presence, too. It has become all but an official language for public sculpture, public and private memorials, and obsessively public grieving. As art succumbs to politics and strives for the monumental, it seems to drift right along with Tolle from feast to famine.

One takes modern museums for granted, just as one takes for granted that Manhattan has become a model for galleries as shopping mall. One takes for granted, too, now that memorials will contain a wall etched with names, combining the solid assurance of victory with the righteousness of innocence. Right now, New Yorkers settle for arguing whether to place the names of firefighters apart from other victims at Ground Zero. A critic praises Minimalism as America's "greatest generation," reinstating exactly the language of a just war.

Perhaps a visit to Dumbo could help dismantle these institutions and enrich the debate over Ground Zero now. Perhaps the celebration this same month, for the 150th anniversary of Central Park, can add yet another model for public art, too—still more open to time and to change. A public space, too, has to build on personal experiences.

Modern art has had an uneasy relationship to politics, as indeed to representation or to any form of common culture. In effect, it has proposed three models for political art—and poked holes in all of them. Art can carry a message, with a sobriety that flies in the face of its own rebellion. It can trust to form alone to awaken a more profound

consciousness, but also one more difficult to trust. Or it can let the two clash, banking on skepticism as a kind of higher honesty.

These three have mattered in the past, and they still matter. They have left more than enough achievements. Call them to account for failure, and they are sly enough to embrace that, too. Some of the sculpture here outdoors, though, does not exactly stick to either a modernist or a postmodern strategy. Often, it offers a connection to political meaning and terror casually, almost carelessly. It sounds too flagrant, dumb, and easy to dismiss. Yet it mimics a time in which political meaning and terror get thrown around carelessly themselves.

Artists and institutions such as the Drawing Center risk conservative wrath whenever they affirm art's place at Ground Zero and in defiance of censorship. As lies about Iraqi ties to Al Qaeda and weapons of mass destruction fall away, the Bush administration clings to a more slippery truth: absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. In art, evidence of absence has a resonance all its own.

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The twenty-first anniversary summer show at Empire Fulton-Ferry State Park in Dumbo ran through September 15, 2003, thanks to the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition. The Madison Square Park Conservancy coordinated Wil Delvoye's summer installations, but he last showed indoors with Sperone Westwater. "Yard" at Socrates Sculpture Park ran through August 3, and Roy Lichtenstein on The Metropolitan Museum of Art roof garden ran through November 2.