

LIBERTY PROP, 1991

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The selection of City Hall Park as a site is of especial importance to Liberty Prop. For almost two hundred years, City Hall has been the center of executive power in New York City. Even prior to the building's construction, City Hall Park had a long history of serving as the site for political demonstrations. Originally the commons, during the Revolutionary period the park was used as the primary location of anti-British demonstrations. The first "Liberty Pole" was erected in the park by the Sons of Liberty; its removal by British soldiers on January 17, 1770 incited a bloody confrontation between colonists and the British, a full five months before the battle at Bunker Hill. Four more poles were in turn erected and removed. To this day, demonstrations are a frequent occurrence in the park, with sometimes two or three scheduled on the same day and often at the same time.

The permanent sculpture in City Hall Park is only tangentially related to the area's peculiarly public and political nature. Aside from the allegorical figure of Justice on the cupola of City Hall, the two sculptures of Horace Greeley (1890) by John Quincy Adams Ward and Nathan Hale (1890) by Frederick MacMonnies are the only sculptures sited in the park.

Greeley, a journalist and political leader, was the editor of the New York Tribune for thirty years. The commemorative sculpture of him was originally located across from City Hall on Park Row in front of the Tribune Building until 1916, when a "right-of-way" dispute required its removal to the park in 1916. Known for his high ideals and moral standards, Greeley encouraged public debate on social and political issues and is best remembered for coining the phrase "Go West, young man."

Hale, the 21-year old Revolutionary Army Captain, is depicted moments before his execution by British troops as he concludes his historic speech with the words "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." It was commonly thought that Hale was executed in City Hall Park, but he was actually executed in Artillery Park at Third Avenue and 66th Street in Manhattan. The sculptures do not follow a comprehensive symbolic program, but present two divergent public/political personas — the glamorous hero and the social reformer — who were both associated with the site in the popular imagination.

City Hall Park thus provides a unique site for art in New York City. As the accepted arena for political life, its densely layered history is nevertheless virtually invisible to the casual passerby. Liberty Prop carefully alludes to those layers and ironically comments on the present, creating a site where the concept and history of liberty can be scrutinized. Even Liberty Prop's name echoes the large "Liberty Pole," located nearby in the park and erected to commemorate its revolutionary precursors, while the flag/billboard images and interior text underscore the work's engagement with the political and public arenas. Indeed, Liberty Prop lies between the "Liberty Pole" and its accompanying explanatory plaque, physically inserted within the narrative of events that is history.

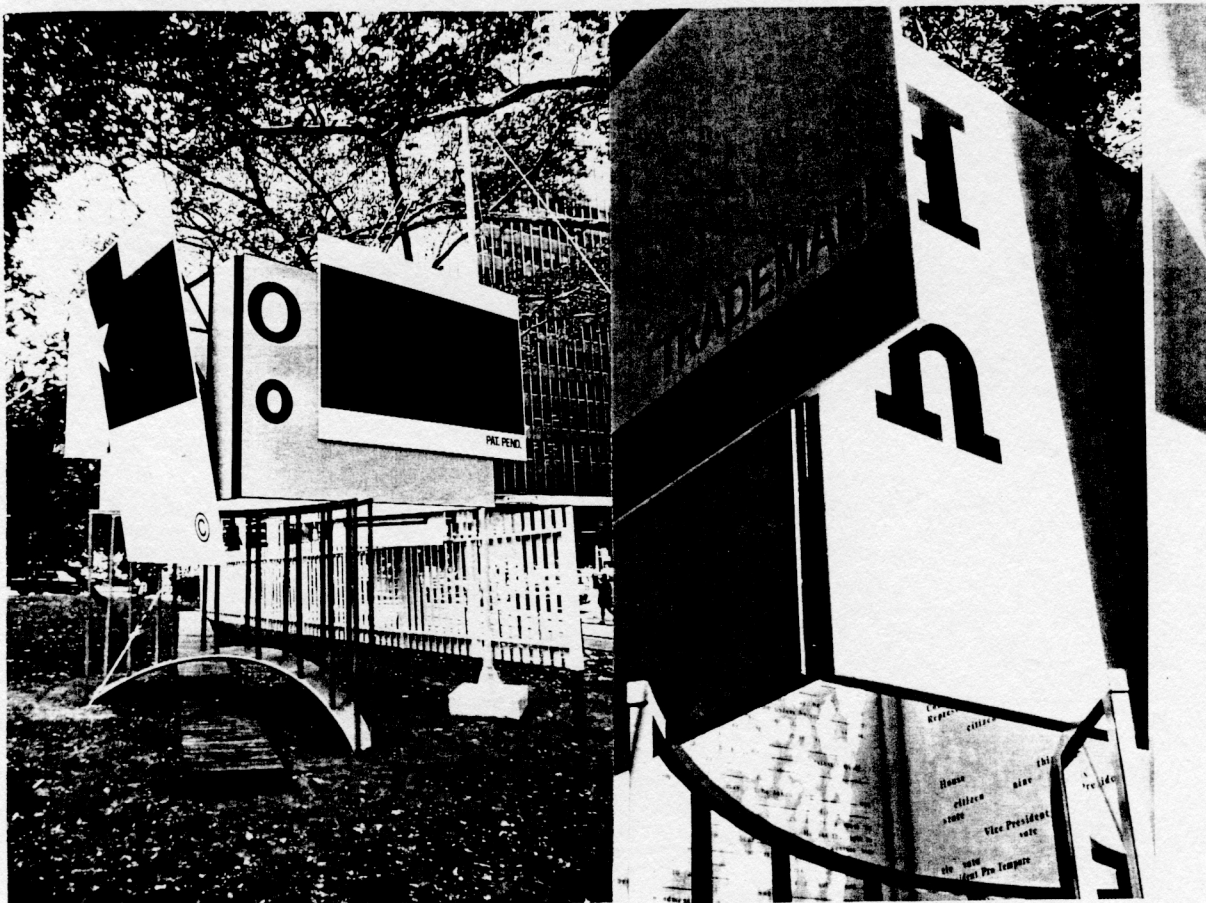
Liberty Prop, a combination pavilion-flagpole-bridge-billboard-path, is a startling take on the traditional garden gazebo, usually a modestly sized structure with a view. Though comprised of such inexpensive and traditional American elements as the picket fence and boardwalk-like path, once the viewer enters the structure all vistas are overwhelmed by the large billboards atop the small, curving bridge and path. In a departure from the usual garden structures that frame a view or provide a comfortable nook, Liberty Prop encourages us to look up at the works that line its interior walls.

Frustrating expectations is an important aspect of our interaction with Liberty Prop. While the bold forms and bright colors of the piece strongly suggest the architectonic and utilitarian sculpture of the Russian constructivists, in Liberty Prop the elevated fence cannot keep anyone out, the flagpole has no flag, the attenuated bridge cannot be crossed, and the boardwalk-like path leads nowhere. Liberty Prop is an intersection of elements rendered useless by their intersection.

Such a studied inutility of elements in the work undoubtedly alludes to the idea that a work of art need not be useful. But the elements that the artists have selected are all structures that usually have a public purpose. The path or bridge guides the pedestrian along an already determined route and the fence, flagpole, and billboard are generally supports for visual and verbal messages addressed to the public. In addition, the path, bridge, and fence are elements that are used to generally control or determine public access to land. Through combining elements that refer to the public realm while draining them of utility, Schafer and Cole underline the preeminence of the symbolic and semiotic function in the public arena — the importance of what things mean and how they convey meaning.

This focus on the symbolic and semiotic is another link to the agit prop pavilions of Constructivism. Like their Constructivist precursors, Schafer and Cole attempt a different method of addressing the public, diverging from our everyday intake of information through news television, which speaks to us in the privacy of home, and through the mass print media (newspapers and magazines), which we read privately, as individuals. Attempting to define the viewer's experience of the work, the artists have referred to Liberty Prop as a type of "newsbox" (newspaper vending machine), pointing to its placement of "information" out on the street or, in this case, in the park. Still, unlike the newsbox, the information is free and on the exterior as well as the interior of the work. And more importantly, unlike the newsbox, several people can "use" the piece at one time.

However, access to the interior of the piece is limited by its size. Hardly an area for mass demonstrations, no more than four or five viewers can easily enter it at any given time. This physical tension between public and private experience, exterior and interior space, suggests that Liberty Prop attempts to address us both as public citizens and private individuals while alluding to the conflict and the connection between the two. For, by calling attention to the distinctions between public and



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private, the work suggests that the public persona is formed and directed by the information the private individual receives and by the methods through which information is transmitted.

In part, therefore, Liberty Prop is an examination of the how information is conveyed. Advertising and education are highlighted in the large, billboard-like structures that form the pavilion proper. Reminiscent of pop imagery of the sixties, the billboards advertise a trademarked product for popular consumption — fragments of the oversized flag. That the flag has become commodified is not an attack on patriotism but a simple acknowledgement that the purest emotions and moral attitudes are regularly employed to promote sales. Indeed, the violent furor that has surrounded any uses of the flag deemed disrespectful clearly indicates the irrationality of this terrain. Love, patriotism, loyalty, and romance are all part of our relationships with the cars we buy, the cigarettes we smoke, the clothes we wear, and the foods we eat.

Furthermore, these billboards are backed by placards with a generic typeface on the upper left corners that recalls flashcards from elementary school. Walking around the work, the viewer can spell out O-A-T-H. With their physical layering of the flashcard O-A-T-H and the trademarked flag, Schafer and Cole suggest that our comprehension of liberty is at times no more than a nod at the American "flag product" or a memorized answer to a question. And by backing the image with the flashcard, they suggest that the type of education exemplified by the flashcard is the necessary background to the reduction of patriotism to product.

Finally, in placing this allusion to the superficial on the exterior, the artists recall the historic opposition between the skin and the soul, surface and depth, and form and content.

The interior of Liberty Prop also deals with the issue of education, containing extensive portions of text that can be more easily read if the viewer leaves the bridge or the path. The placement of text is characteristic of both Schafer's and Cole's individual works, which require movement and active effort as part of the viewing process. Consisting of a "fill in the blanks" exam on the Constitution and the legislative branch of government along with an outline of information on the executive branch of the Federal government, the test is physically and mentally discomforting in that it requires that we crane our necks up to read and that we internally evaluate our factual knowledge of the Constitution. Juxtaposed against the ease of the exterior image, it reminds us that physical and mental labor is necessary to comprehend how liberty is safeguarded.

Liberty Prop is therefore a structure where we can see liberty in all its inherent contradictions, complexities, and complicities. Through its exploration of the relationship between economics, politics, and education, Liberty Prop suggests that we need to guard against our automatic responses in order to truly think freedom.

**DEBORAH BERSHAD
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