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h a r d w o r k h e l p l i b e r t y l i g h t m o r a l

m o v e m e n t p a s s i o n a t e p e a c e p i o n e e r

p r e c i o u s n e s s p r i d e

WESTERN AGENDA

p r o s p e r i t y r e f o r m

FROM ROCKY BALBOA TO CARL ANDRE

The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

—Italo Calvino, ***Invisible Cities***

"It's a remarkable piece of apparatus," said the officer to the explorer and surveyed with a certain air of admiration the apparatus which was after all quite familiar to him.

—Franz Kafka , ***In the Penal Colony***

Come to think of it, I now remember being confused by the strange and hyperbolic goings-on around the placement of the Rocky Balboa monument. From my vantage point then in sunny Southern California in a city that virtually has no past and whose present includes monuments churned out and recycled on the back lots of Hollywood studios, Philadelphia seemed like a stodgy, formal place where things moved in the slow motion created by a weighty history, lots of brick and too many statues. Boxing is an East coast phenomena born in working class sections of industrial boom towns. Somehow a larger-than-life stone Rocky, sited on axis with George Washington and William Penn seemed appropriate in a city that also houses the Declaration of Independence and the Liberty Bell.

The bizarre conflation of fiction and reality, popular versus elite culture which unfolded in the early eighties in Philadelphia escalated to its most ironic pinnacle when the mayor announced that the Rocky Balboa monument was the second largest tourist attraction after the Liberty Bell. This situation is emblematic of the kind of confusion epitomized by the eighties, but also rampantly characteristic of traditional American myth-making. The Rocky monument was dedicated to the city of Philadelphia by Sylvester Stallone in 1982, pre "Rockys I-IV." For the final installment "Rocky V," Stallone wanted the monument restored to its original site atop the steps on the hill leading up to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He, the mayor and vast numbers of loyal followers of Rocky (Balboa and Stallone) wanted the statue left at the site of Rocky's triumphant run up the museum steps which ended in the gesture mimicked by the statue, arms raised in victory—working class boy makes good, good triumphs over evil and

the American dream is mythologized once again. The problem of course was that the museum didn't want the hulking figure on its grounds, though they are public grounds over which the institution has no authority. Thus began a debate about the function of art, (is a movie prop art?, asked the museum), and who has authority to decide. [1]

It is no coincidence that this amusing skirmish between Hollywood, the masses and the museum occurred in the same decade which created that ultimate monument to the American Dream, President Ronald Reagan. The confusion on the part of the public between the real and manufactured monument, both tailor-made in Hollywood, is symptomatic of a greater malaise. Symbols that justify the power of a few over many are instructive in how meaning is embedded in cultural artifacts. Perestroika and Glasnost, Lady Liberty in Tiananmen Square, yellow ribbons and Star Spangled banners. We the people have lost the ability to read our own symbols without regurgitating the media glaze veneered over them. In a recent editorial to *The New York Times,* fiction writer Russell Banks expressed his frustration with the nationalistic surge surrounding the Persian Gulf war:

> *The saddest, most disheartening symbolism I've seen lately is the joining of the two emblems-the mailbox with both flag and big yellow bow attached, the pole with Old Glory above and ribbons swirling below, the tiny paper swatch of yellow acetate pinned to a lapel.*
>
> *What's being symbolized here is a profound conflict between two irreconcilable, painfully opposed desires—to protect our children and to destroy the Iraqi military. For us to affirm that contradiction openly, publicly, as if it did not exist, we must go into deep denial. And when that happens, the symbol no longer stands for reality; it has replaced it.* [2]

This slippage in how we perceive and digest our own history, either in the making or with any amount of (un)critical distance, seems to be a specifically American phenomena. Though current examples abound of misappropriated symbols of democracy, protesting students in China with Lady Liberty at the helm, or East Germans lingering on Ronald Reagan's every word in a seminar

on the theory and practice of democracy, the history of our monument-making has envisioned a new public art which is a peculiar blend of democracy and high culture.

For the last thirty years artists in the United States have advanced a hybridized and democratized approach to making sculpture that has forged a path away from the crusty European Romantic notion of the isolated artist, toward the often idealistic view of artist as cultural worker. When this term was coined in the sixties by Lucy Lippard and the Art Workers Coalition, the term "work" indeed replaced "art" to describe the end result of "artistic" production. The bastardized Rocky Balboa version of European public statuary which clutters the East and South of the Union is alive only in the rhetoric of our leaders whose narcotic brand of flag waving relies heavily on memorializing places, documents and heroes whose histories are little known and seldom questioned.

One might say that the optimistic side of the myth of democracy has been played out in our recent sculpture. On the one hand there are fascinating and absurd examples of the happy marriage of people and place such as the Rockefeller sponsored preservation (recreation, reclamation, appropriation) of Colonial Williamsburg. History as Disneyland. Place as monument. The pilgrimages to the Berlin Wall by western leaders and Ronald Reagan's plea of "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," demonstrate, on a media-enhanced scale, our obsession with the symbolic triumph of the everyman over the forces of evil. On the other end of the scale is the *Tilted Arc* controversy: the apparent rejection by the public of an American artist whose approach to site strove to acknowledge their lives, albeit by interrupting them. The Wall and the Arc, both physically removed due to different onslaughts of the masses, the public hommage to a city cum tourist monument embodied by Williamsburg and Berlin, and the dramatic public demise of *Tilted Arc*—each raises the question of what happens to monuments after their function is radically altered, and how they continue to signify.

The six artists in this exhibition have each found ways to address site, spectatorship and the problematic of the object in the viewing situation. Using sculpture as a metaphor to reference a particular moment in history when art functioned as a mechanism for political protest, is one strategy to examine how global politics effect boundaries of public and private viewing space (Schafer). The territories of personal versus public are further articulated by exploring how these definitions are arbitrated and by proposing alternative symbols (Houser, Garwood). The monumental cannon of western art history is probed by deflowering and re-sexualizing the mute objects of Minimalism (Monti, Gerber, McBride). Each of the six artists deconstructs objecthood from within the context of the Artists Space gallery, a space which was itself established to supplement the stricture imposed by the economy of the commercial gallery system. The inherent contradiction of making objects which seek to subvert the parasitic relationship of the object to the exhibition space is acknowledged in each artist's work.

The Constructivist skeleton of *Western Agenda*, the installation by David Schafer from which this exhibition takes its name, confronts the viewer upon entering the gallery. In referencing the early twentieth century Russian avant-garde, Schafer self-consciously situates his large scale sculpture in a political/theatrical relationship with the viewer. The sculpture radically alters the physical relationship of public to monument using the Constructivist model of reversing artist/viewer roles. Artist as worker, art as vehicle for social change and viewer as collaborator are the catalysts for a radical formal upending of traditional power structures. The viewer is quite literally raised onto the orator's platform, to a point uncomfortably close to the gallery ceiling, where surveillance is possible. A breakdown of economic boundaries engenders a radical altering in definitions of personal and public spatial conformities, as in Eastern Europe where individuals become units, nomadic villages, as they move all their belongings across borders and settle. Hierarchy of place is destroyed. The body becomes a city.

Despite its heroic size, *Western Agenda* is a kind of attenuated nervous system which is contingent on the architecture of the gallery, strung-up like a makeshift stage. Schafer describes it as "a cross between laboratory, circus, music hall, sports arena, public discussion hall, scientific theater or epic theater."[3] The form itself calls attention not only to its own construction but to the intentionality of the gallery space. The viewer, the public, makes the transition from the street to the interior by way of the foyer which includes reception area and gallery shop.

Sculpture as apparatus or prop is an area Page Houser has pursued to find form for his seductive and deceptively graceful constructions. For the past several years since his work at a skid row mission in downtown Los Angeles, Houser has tried to reconcile conflicting ideas about shelter, alienation, interior and exterior space and architecture of place. What is the minimum physical structure necessary to imply shelter? Careful not to propose viable habitational alternatives, which inevitably fall into the cynical trap of proposing solutions for social ills within the rarified confines of the gallery walls, Houser instead tries to reinstate the dignity of place by positing archetypal models such as loggia, ziggurat, sarcophagus. In new work made for this exhibition a flagpole is the pathetic stand-in for the empty symbolism that justifies a broad range of abuses of power. A jerry-rigged set of four panels can be raised to reveal the nakedness of the denuded pole. Unlike Old Glory, Houser's imposter flag panels are made of cheap windowshade plastic and suspended by a platform whose weight will collapse the pole if raised to full extension. We pledge allegiance to the impotent male symbol.

The injustice of homelessness and the precarious nature of the socio-economy are the conceptual core of much of Houser's work. The urban fabric as it organically develops, according to economic need and the vagaries of public policy, is the subtext of an earlier piece. In *Information Center*, hundreds of cards are printed with wallpaper on one side and

topographical maps on the other locating skid row areas in United States cities. In an untitled corner piece made for this exhibition he references the street by using a large fragment of industrial steel, the kind you walk over in construction sites all over New York City. The triangulated chunk creates a corner space that roughly inscribes a dwelling or spatial alternative which could be fused into the city geography without disturbance. Lush green velvet yanks-up the steel plate, attached to it with rivets made of pierced quarters. One hand feeds the other.

The legibility of the city is part of Rita McBride's investigation using the metatext of the skyscraper as urban, capitalist monument. *General Growth* is a mute, barely hovering curve, column, wall, bulkhead. McBride asks how the furniture of the gallery, either its contents or architecture, can be read abstractly. How do we apprehend the body of a city? Max Kozloff has recently written about the "impossible gestalt" of the skyscraper:

> *The distance necessary to grasp their actual shape is too removed to apprehend their physiognomy...Because of this exceptional height, skyscrapers often generate this cognitive dilemma enhanced by the inevitable throng of their own kind. The absolute discrepancy between the size of the object and the perceiver injects an irrational tone– and frustration—in the experience of the building."*[4]

By definition *bulk* is "a structure projecting from a building," with *head* means "an upright partition separating compartments; a structure or partition to resist pressure or to shut off water, fire, or gas."[5] The ellipse of McBride's obstruction derives from a mirrored, pink building which punctuates the architectural corridor of Lexington Avenue. The experience of the building is like that of being at the base of a huge steamship—the vertigo of overwhelming form. The building and the sculpture are at some level incomprehensible. Witness the gradual shift towards abstraction in architectural photography epitomized by the countless photographs of the Flatiron Building as a vertical plane. Or, one of McBride's favorite references,

the Guggenheim Museum which is the ultimate dysfunctional monument: at no point on the long curvilinear descent is the art ever accurately legible. Sculpture is never level, canvases are never flat. Frank Lloyd Wright's audacity is both charming and imperial: sculpture masquerading as architecture.

Creating an object which is indistinguishable from the gallery context is McBride's conceptual nod to the Michael Asher project at Artists Space in 1988. "Asher's unpainted extensions of [existing gallery walls] succeed in 'restoring' the space to a more neutral state and reveal the sculptural pretense of architecture that diverges from its self-effacing role as backdrop."[6] It is the architecture pretending to be art pretending to be architecture that amuses McBride. When we walk around the back of her aerodynamically correct bulkhead we come upon a series of weight lifting belts, a corset, which links the structure to the column within the gallery. The leather is a bondage reference exposing the physical dependency of the object on the architecture, catching it with its pants down.

The sexual punning embedded in *General Growth* , reminiscent of Vito Acconci's brand of public art where the gallery becomes a metaphor for the body, as in the recent *Adaptable Wall Bras* installation, is evident in much of McBride's work. Both McBride and Ava Gerber reclaim the world of male monuments into the female domain. Though artists such as Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois stand out as precursors in the realm of feminized sculpture, these artists are not content with biomorphizing their forms. Instead of lulling us with elevator music, they would rather blast Madonna from the bowels of the gallery. Gerber's absurdly oversized pillows celebrate the gallery as furniture showroom and absolutely deflate the supposed neutrality of sculptural monuments. The pillows themselves are not actually the absurdly oversized sacs on which we all perched to watch television in the seventies; they are reconstructed, soft sculptures which revive their earlier counterparts. They are funked-up icons to power and form, taste and class, and their lack. Gerber's pillows are both high and

low, pushing at artificially imposed categories of decorative and craft arts. She shifts the territory of painting from the wall to the voluptuous surfaces of her pillows reinventing the floral landscapes in paint instead of needlework or embroidery. Hers is the antidote to the recent spate of bad-boyism plaguing the art world.

Restoring pleasure in the object and locating a gendered territory between the formal realms of painting and sculpture is evidenced in Gerber's choice of dumbly Minimalist groupings of abstract, geometric forms. Subtly titled *White Pillow (Untitled)* and *Black and White Pillow (Untitled)* these pillows are configured in diptychs and triptychs, the diamond shape of the white pillows and their arrangement mimicking a Richard Serra sculpture. The macho geometry of Minimalism is sexed-up to pay tribute instead, "to acknowledge and commend women on their creative achievements and contributions in quilting, embroidery and needle work."[7] The theater of Minimalism is forced to include the realm of sleep, sex, dreams, death and comfort.

Historically, the function of both non-western and western monuments originated out of the cultural need for commemoration. Whether an inscription, a coin, a city, a rock, great pyramid, triumphal arch or an obelisk, public statuary has primarily glorified power, usually male, actual or constructed. In the United States monument making or "memorial work" was originally the territory of women, and culture was the unifying realm between the sexes. The political was made more palatable by women.[8]

John Monti's *Rocker Variation* is a pyramid of rockers, railroad ties and coffin-like boxes stacked on top of a black and white cement tile floor. More abstractly figurative than earlier work, this absurdly top heavy arrangement of building block forms is loosely based on the Medici Chapel and its beautifully gloomy sarcophagi. The drama orchestrated by those heavy Renaissance boxes, their presence as containers of history, is the place from where Monti's rockers draw their power. The black and white floor, the essential iconic base, is at once a

domestic surface, a triumphal platform, a gameboard and a stage which inscribes its own space from which to present the sculptural pile. The low height of this grided pedestal anchors the structure to the floor in the same way Brancusi's sculptural bases connect with the earth and share the space of the viewer.

The figurative is implicated in the attitude of the work towards scale. The rockers which, in fact, contain weights to balance the load, are human-scale container forms on top of which the boxes become like a torso. The dark humor of the pine box carries multiple associations, from Tutankhamen to Donald Judd, and the oxymoronic choice of the fine quality pine as plywood, an entirely manufactured material, pokes fun at the purity of Minimalism. The Carl Andre/Lincoln Log railroad ties subvert from within and anchor the sculptural context in the present as much as the grid refers back to Albertian construction of space. The construction of the viewer into the piece and the placement of the boxes is orchestrated by the grid.

In a paper entitled "Microsculpture," Deborah Garwood addresses the definition of public art:

> *"Public Art", on the other hand, is a broader term. It spans everything from postmodern political activism to the problematic domain of "high art" commissioned for institutions to well-meaning efforts to ask art to humanize sterile new environments....The issue of the body is inevitable in a discussion of size, scale, numbers, and humanity in relation to sculpture. A discussion of size, therefore, lends itself to questions of personal and global politics. The question becomes, what is human on a public scale.*[9]

Garwood's car doors and easels are icons of the personal and the public. Disturbed by the schism between the public definition of the public, as perpetrated in the rhetoric surrounding the recent NEA controversy, and her own conviction about the personal, as political as public, Garwood symbolizes this rift in the most basic way. Somewhere between the car door of the suburban masses and the easel of the artists's garret is the reality of the audience. She, We are the public.

The aural component of the *Car Doors & Easels* installation gives abstract form to knowledge (self-knowledge and world knowledge) and poses the question of how meaning and memory are constituted in our non-verbal consciousness. Garwood's easels are flat, stretched, flimsy and awkward. The eighties are over and artist/object worship seems silly now. New representations must be found. Who decides what objects mean? How is meaning attached to our cultural detritus and why? How do we understand the visual clutter left in the wake of the inevitable pumping-up and conceptual emptying out of our symbols? How does our relationship change to the objects of worship that are littered, salon-style, throughout the fabric of our popular culture? Perhaps a gallery filled with colliding monuments is a sign of the times.

CONNIE BUTLER

NOTES

1. This cursory summary of the events surrounding the Rocky Balboa monument is excerpted from "The Rocky Dilemma: Monuments and Popular Culture in the Post-Modern Era," a paper by Danielle Rice delivered at the College Art Association conference, 1991.
2. Russell Banks, "White, Blue, Yellow," *The New York TImes*, Op. Ed., February 21, 1991.
3. Excerpted from the artist's project notes, 1991.
4. Max Kozloff, "Skyscrapers The Late Imperial Mob," *Artforum*, December 1990, p. 9.
5. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, (Springfield, Mass.: G&C, Merriam Company, 1971).
6. Anne Rorimer, "Michael Asher and James Coleman at Artists Space," Michael Asher/James Coleman exhibition catalogue, Artists Space, 1988, p. 13.
7. Excerpted from artist's statement, 1991.
8. For a fascinating study of racism and sexism in monuments and memorial work see Kirk Savage's discussion of the Robert E. Lee monument in his paper "En-gendering White Supremacy: The Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia," delivered at the College Art Association Conference, 1991.
9. Excerpted from symposium paper, "Microsculpture," Fine Arts Gallery, University of Rhode Island, January 1989.