

READING THE PARK: THE STAGING OF PUBLIC PLEASURE

*Public art is non-monumental. It is low, common and near to the people.
(Siah Armajani, public artist)*

Typifying the American compulsion to narrate pedestrian objects, the need to somehow bring the mountain to life, Mt. Rushmore is perhaps the most peculiar of tourist conceits. A strange species of monumental sculpture, Mt. Rushmore may also be understood as a kind of public art. One's approach to the monument itself is carefully orchestrated by the "park" territory which frames the journey culminating in the monumental view. The experience of the sculpture by the majority of visitors is, in fact, from the observation deck hundreds of feet below. Notable for the artificiality of its staging, the evening lighting ceremony begins with a sweeping historical overview by a park ranger and culminates with the singing of the nation's anthem as a yellow glow spreads over the faces of Presidents Lincoln, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Washington. The crescendo of the lighting is accompanied by an audible gasp on the part of the audience gathered to watch the pseudo-event of a mountain, or rather a sculpture on the side of an outcrop, "come alive." Patriotic and nostalgic, these are people seeking leisure with meaning.

What is this need for monuments to speak? The artifice inherent in this kind of tourist experience, what theorist Dean MacCannell has called "staged authenticity," is common to virtually all sites of leisure. That is, any situation which dictates a social function. In each case there is established a front and back stage, one area inhabited by the viewer, the other by those orchestrating the viewing experience. The fact of this distance, this problematized space between the staging area, the viewer and the artifact, is necessarily deployed to enhance the mystery or attraction of a tourist site: bridging the gulf separating viewer and monument, one of the most seductive moments of the film *North by Northwest* is the pursuit of Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint down the forehead and nose of Mt. Rushmore.

The intentionality underlying nineteenth century park design and the development of a unique public expression in American art have much in common. The notion of choreographing a grand narrative for nature evolved out of the picturesque movement in landscape design, reaching its height in the pleasure gardens of late eighteenth century Britain and influencing such nineteenth century American artists as Thomas Cole and the Hudson River Painters whose pastoral landscapes reacted against sweeping industrialization and longed for a time when man was under the spell of a nature untamed. European parks in Paris and London inspired the City Beautiful movement in this country. Nature as a backdrop for social theater found its American embodiment both in National park schemes such as Yosemite National Park, where the boundlessness of nature was tamed, or grand city parks such as New York's Central Park and Prospect Park designed by the team of landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted and architect Calvert Vaux. Commodified landscape in the form of elaborately schematic parks, neither urban nor wild, became the symbolic place for what Olmsted called the marriage of town and country.

Not surprisingly it is this American vernacular of public recreational space that informs the current work of many artists who theorize public space by locating their investigations between the front and back stage of a public site. David Schafer's *Pastoral Mirage*, a multi-site installation in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, is a project that follows in a tradition of architectural sculpture which engages site as subject. Informed by contemporary revisionist history, Schafer's project aims to research and restore the hidden narratives embedded in Olmsted's scripted vision for Prospect Park. The assumed neutrality of the garden or park and the Olmsted text which frames and shapes it is the territory of Schafer's investigation. "Nature does not present itself as a collection of signifiers on the one hand and a collection of signifieds on the other" (MacCannell) Through a series of site markers the artist extracts the Olmsted's text from the landscape and reasserts it as part of the public

experience: "The park is a re-creation of a natural geography, an authentic replica, a formal artifice that hides its author...I want to access the past by returning the author (Olmsted), to the site (Park), to complete the text (landscape)."

Indeed, in creating an engaged public, mirroring Olmsted's own ideals about a public involved in nature, the project is generous in its intentions. It references a certain optimism about being in nature. Unlike Earth Art of the sixties which responded directly to the physical experience of natural surroundings, this work is conceptually integrated with its site. It disintegrates notions of the discrete object or constructed public sculpture in favor of decentralized information throughout the Park. By foregrounding language, making an a priori script for the pastoral experience, Schafer insists on a less passive relationship with the Park and the surrounding city.

Olmsted's original text, insisting on a parenthetical relationship with the park, subliminally guides the viewer's attention by the orchestrated rise and fall of the terrain and the winding narrative of the walkways. The presence of "artificial objects," which might distract from the experience of nature, was strictly disallowed. So, too, the brightly colored signs of Schafer's

Olmsted and Vaux Landscape Co. "The nature of the Park depends upon the gradual education of public opinion in the appreciation of its natural scenery" (Olmsted). Schafer attempts a re-education through his contemporary re-reading. The voice of the Park and the sight of the viewer come together in the reading of "the vision contained in the text. Authority is restored to the Park....Speech intervenes, reflects, and frames the displacement of Olmsted's control of the bucolic flow."

By design, the Olmsted paragraphs and highlighted words of *Pastoral Mirage* conflate the elementary style of flashcards and the cinematic character of floating subtitles on a screen. In a way, reminiscent of Jean Luc Godard's use of banal cityscapes and landscapes punctuated by frames of solid color with a single word or phrase, the viewer is reminded of the constructed reality of his or her surroundings. Schafer embraces this kind of hybridized Pop landscape and uses the Park as a field for projection. Formally, the utilitarian signs or screens reference the grace and complexity of contemporary British tensile architecture, the futuristic scale of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes and the agit-pros of Russian constructivist Jorge Klutis.

In each case Olmsted's nineteenth century



Photo : Mary Cregg

project have an elliptical purpose. The disruption of the bucolic that occurs with the intervention of the Olmsted text interrogates the power of the authorial voice of the park. The signs become a kind of rambling advertisement for the Park and potentially guide visitor circulation through the flora, turf, trees and other boscage so carefully controlled by the professional team of

viewer and Schafer's twentieth century voyeur complete the text of the Park. Restaged and recast in *Pastoral Mirage* the optimism of creating an engaged public is twice the agenda.

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