

# Common Ground?

By Arlene Raven

## Pastoral Mirage

A multisite installation by David Schafer  
Sponsored by the Prospect Park Alliance  
Prospect Park, Brooklyn  
Through March 1

Prospect Park boasts the last forest in Brooklyn. But the "natural" resources of the 562-acre preserve of woodlands, meadows, bluffs, and ponds are neither untouched nor uncultivated nor even indigenous. Never rooted in native soil, the vegetation of Prospect Park has been raw material for the landscape architecture that is an intrinsic part of the mid-19th-century city plan of the borough.

Brooklyn—a century ago the third largest municipality in the United States—purchased the land for Prospect Park in 1859. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux's design of 1866 shaped the park in its entirety, yet could not completely dictate its building program, culminating in the 1890s with Stanford White's execution of the monumental approach via Grand Army Plaza. At this entrance, the first four of 20 bright-yellow billboards with black printed texts appear as a four-sided, 22-foot-high structure that rises on a steel-cable-mounted pole and is topped with a green triangular flag. Another identical sculpture graces the entrance at the opposite end of the park near the Parade Ground. Twelve other steel posts placed throughout the park to illuminate their sites contain single placards on 16-foot heights.

*Pastoral Mirage*, Brooklyn artist David Schafer's title for his multisite installation, has been in situ since July. Schafer's signs contain excerpts from Olmsted's 1864-74 writings, each representing a significant aspect of the earlier artist's vision for the park.

The first sign, "I (CITY)," emphasizes the composition of the altered landscape as an artistic depiction: "The principal entrance to a large metropolitan park admits in its design of more than one theory of artistic arrangement. The contrast between the urban and rural requires in some cases to be sharply drawn, the city enclosing the park as squarely and completely as a picture-frame encloses a picture."

Schafer wanted Prospect Park as a whole to be viewed anew through his recapitulation of the original intent of its structure and use. A "pastoral mirage" is one name for a garden-variety definition of any art object. As optical effects that use nature as a point of reference, scenes visible from every viewer's perspective will be as illusory and unattainable as the idealism of the creative intelligence that composed them. An urban countryside is, as well, a contradiction in terms that exists in the mind of the beholder and can float on a layer of hot air. The Band Shell is a mirror of the whole, a mirage within the mirage designed to make the world of the park a stage for theatrical magic: an orchestra, as Olmsted wrote, "to be placed upon a small island, about one hundred feet from a



Is David Schafer's *Pastoral Mirage* in Prospect Park too aptly named?

semicircular sweep of shore, in the direction where the audience is expected chiefly to congregate."

As much a human-made construction as the surrounding city of Brooklyn, Prospect Park is also as fully a work of art as any other artist-created public monument. As Schafer quotes Olmsted on "20 (MOTIVE)," "The park throughout is a single work of art, and as such to the primary law of art, namely, that it shall be formed upon a single, noble motive, to which the design of all its parts, in one more or less subtle way, shall be confluent and helpful."

Schafer has not used his sites as simply places to put his tall sculptural towers. His installation instead addresses the park itself as the primary artwork, his own contribution intended to provide a guide through the thought process of its creator. The generic signage is meant to render pedestrians, cyclists, Rollerbladers, and runners self-conscious of their journeys along Olmsted's prescribed paths.

Schafer is as patriotic as Olmsted in intending to educate Americans to enduring American ideals. He is as democratic as his forebear in designating the entire community as his potential audience. He and his subject are equally optimistic in holding out the possibility of a vision of perfection. Still, the younger artist does not indulge in a merely romantic nostalgia for bygone times when he reasserts the seminal ambition of Olmsted's plan.

Schafer's postmodernistic forms derive from Minimalism and Image/Text, yet *Pastoral Mirage* is not directed at the disembodied conglomeration of objects and markets that make up the non-community of the established art audience. His is emphatically a public message meant to court a preexisting audience: any and all who use the park during the short life of the piece.

I am tempted to place Schafer's generic aesthetic, as well as his

altruistic purpose in reaching out as an artist among neighbors, squarely in the traditions of the community arts. Government-sponsored programs of the 1930s, such as the Roosevelt administration's New Deal federal theater and writing projects, and the WPA's mural commissions, often focused on methods and subjects related to artists as workers that were supposed to contribute a sense of history and self-consciousness to their own neighborhoods. A similar mission fuels the energies of contemporary groups such as the multiorganizational Alternative ROOTS (Regional Organization of Theaters South) or the temporary local societies gathered by artists working with the elderly, homeless, or youth in a particular city or town.

As an expression of the life of the Brooklyn community, Schafer's work cannot be understood as the sum of its physical components. The essence of the piece is in fact ultimately non-

physical: its function as the vehicle for a conversation created across time between the original artist of Prospect Park and his present-day audience.

Why, then, has the physical presence of Schafer's work been perceived by more than a few as intrusive, and its words inaccessible? Negative responses to *Pastoral Mirage* have raised the question of who—Olmsted, Schafer, or even Brooklyn borough president Howard Golden—is a priori qualified to represent the communal eye? And, in this case, is some degree of aesthetic sophistication and art history education essential to understanding and appreciation after all?

Although, according to Melissa Benson, curator of the visual arts program for the Prospect Park Alliance, a competitive call for entries was advertised, no neighborhood- or borough-wide discussion was built into the proposal process. Not surprisingly, many observers of *Pastoral Mirage* saw the big black and yellow signs as garish public sculptures obstructing their "natural" field of vision.

*Pastoral Mirage* is largely about words—their root meanings and historical elaborations. Its simplicity of design and typography is complicated by the archaic language and syntax of the Olmsted quotations. And a large segment of park users do not read English at all. The Alliance received dozens of calls and letters protesting even the temporary existence of *Pastoral Mirage*. One writer pointed out that the park is a haven to escape "mean streets and all their traffic signs and signals—only now, to find them offensively replicated midst the greenery."

Another grumpy citizen hoped that the piece would be "trashed by the end of the summer." Though too tall to be easily graffitied, some of the billboards were dented from rocks repeatedly thrown. Because, in a great number of New York neighborhoods, any surface can be a target for mindless defacement, I cannot be sure how much (if any) thought concerning the effectiveness of Schafer's project can be attributed to the particular hostility here. But, just as notably, almost no one felt that s/he owned the work enough to want to protect it.

Olmsted maintained a long-standing interest in how immigration shaped the American character. Similarly, Schafer wanted to address the polarities of the bordering neighborhood and the wide ethnic, economic, and social strata of park users. But in the end he may have left too much to the 19th-century imagination and put too little emphasis on the realities of his late 20th-century audience.

Ideals and values can communicate across a century, but not without gathering ironic twists and turns to the original meanings. Olmsted wanted to provide an environment in which people could wander undisturbed. But in June 1993, two weeks before *Pastoral Mirage* was installed, a schoolteacher was murdered in broad daylight by teenagers—for his bike.

David Schafer thoughtfully conceived and handsomely fabricated his work. For me, the installation invites reflections on the future possibilities of peace embedded in an enduring heritage of past ideals. Yet the public life of *Pastoral Mirage* has participated equally in extending the stormy entanglements of present-day New York.