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PUBLIC SCULPTURE - WHOSE ART?

If there is any shared consideration within the practice of sculpture it may have to do with the physical fact of the thing itself - the power of objects. A sculpture exists in real time and real space; it has a palpable reality; it is affected by light, dark, cold or heat. Although we live in a culture surrounded by every kind of physical object and we spend many long years of service in their maintenance, it is sculpture that separates out the object-ness of things, their quiddity, their ontology. It is this quality that compels us to it.

The question of context is equally central to any discussion of public sculpture. Any object raised for common consideration and entered into the public domain carries with it a burden of proof that it works, that it does what *it* intends, that it gives us a sense of the logic of its presence and purpose.

The question of what makes a sculpture public is best answered in terms of its place. There is virtually no such thing as public sculpture in the sense that it was chosen by a public. Instead, various systems of representation act on behalf of the public, as their proxy, leading to the appearance of the work in a public place. Most public sculpture, as with architecture itself, is decided upon by art professionals with virtually no public input.

But in this age of managerial expertise and specialization, which breaks down the process of public consultation into bureaucratically assimilable bits, art continues to receive the brunt of public criticism for its appearance, far more so than architecture. *It* is part of the general perception that architecture is necessary and normal, in fact, "natural" in the growth of cities. So architecture is not implicated in the kind of resistance accorded art. Public criticism of art exposes the demonstrable freedom of intention expressed by the artists, through the work, and the alienated position of the spectators their relative powerlessness within the mechanisms of the city and the built environment. The appearance of art, not tied to the needs of work in the city, but to autonomous desire and free expression, threatens the viewer. The decline of acceptance of public sculpture in the city is partly a function of this implicit criticism of the alienating effects of the city itself.

And what of the work? What does it present to the spectator in the street? People who are willing to accept modernism in the public gallery and the private collection may view public work as esoteric and unapproachable. The cultural

propensity for immediate recognition and unreflective absorption of books, magazines, films and television has led to a condition of acceptance of work based on previous experience and "types." The spectator will accept anything that conforms to expectations that have already been met. Culturally shared beliefs, those metaphorical, allegorical, mythic and symbolic modes of communication that draw on archetypes and a sense of history, have been replaced with immediacy of recognition, foregoing the reflective consideration necessary to make sense of the links of history. Most current cultural experience depends instead on collapsing historic categories into a pool of general cultural information which can be tapped at random for whatever purpose. This has had two effects on public sculpture.

In the first place, it has meant the acceptance of stylistic pluralism which has resulted in an enormous range of kinds of work. In the second place, it has fostered an internationalism that separates work from considerations of locale and circumstance that traditionally gave rise to meaning. The results of this, for public sculpture, turn back on the work with mixed effect.

To sculpture's apparent advantage, the work has a predetermined categorical recognizability. People who have no experience of the history of art "know art when they see it," almost regardless of what it actually looks like. The casual spectator is further reinforced in this view by the systematic appearance of such sculpture in the park, the plaza, the gallery. They know it is that singular, free-standing, independent object, in some durable material, that sits in relation to architecture or nature. The spectator gets the impression that this is the right and traditional place for sculpture and that sculpture is some kind of physical expression of an artist's imagination, something to look at. Except for those works identified as monument, like the bronze plaque, it is difficult to recognize any purpose beyond the aesthetic. Sculpture presents itself as useless in the functional sense, although work is obviously involved in its creation. But what its work or purpose is, once the sculpture is in place, may be difficult for the spectator to discern. Its internal visual workings seem "interesting," or "unusual" or "unique," even "cute," but what is its real relation to the life of the urban worker?

The presence of a lone work indicates two relationships. One is the original, inspirational response of the artist to materials, marked by inner direction, a cognizance of art history, the history of form, and possibly the need to express some social purpose. These considerations may be different from a second one which brings that work to rest in the public space. The interests of those who commission a work are equally varied, ranging from an idea of beautification, to sponsorship of the propagation of culture through art, to demonstrations of corporate support for the ideals of art and responsibility to the community.

A suitably content-free expression, in its aesthetic sublimation, suggests a value-free relationship between the sponsor and the artist. The work is accepted on both sides as "art for art's sake," as if this described the limits of its possible reception. But what, beyond this aesthetic consideration, do we have? Many people would argue that this is sufficient and right, and to make art attempt more is to stretch the definition of art beyond what it can reasonably sustain. But let's return for a moment to the idea of that "work" a piece of sculpture does. It would be premature to stop at a work's aesthetic envelope, however engaging it may be, without considering what a work may further intend. Surely its public appearance is a social act.

Every work engages a more complex social context than its simple aesthetic appearance suggests. Historically, public sculpture has developed largely as an urban phenomenon. It has traditionally appeared either in relation to architecture or to nature (the park and the garden), but each work also engenders a relationship between the artist and the spectator and this introduces ideas of the social and communal.

Sculpture and Architecture

Since before the Golden Age of Greece and the Athens of Pericles, the overriding context for public sculpture has been the city itself and, within that, architecture. It is architecture which shares with sculpture its material base, its tectonic form, its volumetric and massive inflections, its play of light and shade. The relationship between sculpture and architecture has existed as one of the most symbiotic within the arts for literally thousands of years and continued in near unbroken fashion up to the late 19th century, at which point a crisis emerged, continuing into the present as one aspect of the conflict of modernism.

Sculpture and architecture were inseparably linked and finally achieved their most compelling fusion in the Baroque. Bernini's Corona chapel and the sculptural group the *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*, can be regarded as a consummate example. It is within the 19th century and the rise of the modern city that a breakdown of this relationship occurs. The collapse of the Academy, and with it the Beaux Arts tradition, coincides with a material shift in the construction techniques of architecture. The introduction of concrete and iron girder construction changed not only the material base of architecture, but its formal aspirations as well. At the close of the century, the Eiffel Tower appeared, the triumphant union of steel technology and engineering, in an abstraction of architecture that indicated architecture's sculptural possibilities for the 20th century.

Simultaneously, the work of the leading sculptor of the 19th century, Auguste Rodin, resulted in a sculpture that could no longer find its place in architecture: the rootless monument, the memorial with no place. Neither his *Balzac* nor his *Gates of Hell* were installed in their commissioned relation to architecture and his *Burghers of Calais* met with tremendous opposition in giving up sculpture's traditional pedestal. But it was the *Gates*, an architectural commission, that indicated the real break in the traditional union between architecture and sculpture. The sculptural figuration of the Romantic Rodin continued in Brancusi who finally developed an abstraction based on his native Rumanian wood-architectural tradition. His work reflects the changed relationship that was to develop more thoroughly in the 20th century.

The new developments in architecture gave recognition to the architect as artist paving the way for the Master Builders. The romance of the studio artist, withdrawing from the problems of the city into the hermetic isolation of the studio, was in marked contrast to the rise of the architect-artist whose forceful declaration of the needs of urban architecture resulted in the development of an architecture of self-sufficiency, independent of sculpture. The separation of art and architecture grew as did their disparity of scale. From this point on each declared its independence in a demonstration of the contrast of their aims, rather than their former collaboration. While they continued to draw material inspiration from each other, their goals drew apart.

The movement of constructivism in Russia, one of the most radical shifts in Western Art, developed a structural syntax based on abstracted engineering and its relation to new materials, coupled with a recognition of social need. It was openly progressive and supported a new aesthetic based on a return to geometric first-principles, the pragmatics of engineering, and a reiteration of art in architecture through a shared vocabulary and the social goal of the aesthetically integrated life.

Through the Bauhaus, these principles of truth to materials, a functional relationship between form and content, and an internally self-reflexive aesthetic of economy and efficiency spread throughout Europe and North America. The legacy of this movement surrounds us in the city today. The glass curtain wall, over concrete and steel structure, became the normative expression of the International Style by mid-century.

At the same time, sculpture emerged from its psychological interiority of surrealism, the inner life of the studio, to contrast with the extroversion of architecture. After World War II, the vast building programs in Europe and America presented possibilities for a new alignment between architecture and sculpture. With the legislation of architecture to incorporate set-backs and plazas



into building projects, allowing more light into the core of the city, a new opportunity was introduced for sculpture to re-establish itself in the form of the plaza monument.

The relationship is now fixed. It is clear that architecture will dominate, while sculpture performs a new function. The modern skyscraper has clearly separated the scale of building from human scale. The function of sculpture is now to mediate between these two scales. Its form, rectilinear or biomorphic abstraction, becomes its own international style. More importantly, sculpture is recognized as embodying within its abstraction a sense of human individual labour, the ideal of emancipation that the life of the artist represents. Architecture is similarly utopian, but committed to its own reiteration and reappearance in an image of futurism, the physical manifestation of progress and industry.

The rise of the modern city is objectified most obviously within architecture as the municipal self-image of power, success and vitality. The domination of architecture becomes the image of the corporate ideal. The international style no longer has roots in place or locus as architecture once had, but in the universal ideal of the city itself, an idea now shared by thousands of urban centres which, with some variation, all look alike.

Sculpture and the Failure of the Modern City

The concept of the plaza sculpture comes out of a failure of the modern city to be entirely convincing as an enterprise linked as it is to the alienated experience of the urban dweller, the authoritarian rule of the corporate image, and the deteriorated underside of city life, partially brought about by the dislocation caused by new building. In this scenario, sculpture acts to assuage the guilty conscience of architecture, to reintroduce the humanizing element into a situation that architecture has superseded. In this, it acts as a sign of freedom without actually being free. Even the scale of the plaza demands that sculpture adapt to the industrial mode, to establish the scale necessary for a convincing relationship between building and sculpture. Sculpture serves as a reminder of the artistic aspirations of an earlier historic moment when the relationship was understood and felt by the class that was its audience. This moment has long since been replaced by a simulacra - a quotation of meaning from a former time; potential content that is no longer present. Instead, the content reiterates the material associations desired by the builders of the city in their wish to validate their structures by association with an art that arose in an enlightened past. By offering up the image of that past in the current body of sculpture, sculpture is asked to verify the built environment, to justify an artless and ill-considered megalopolis that contains its own base aesthetic within its reiterated body, but



which chooses to adorn itself with costume jewelry because it no longer believes in the worth of the individual body.

The materials of sculpture have shifted in acknowledgment of this need. Welded steel is a favoured material for much public work. The use of industrial components suggests links to the world of the factories at the outskirts of the city, now brought back into the urban core through the sign of sculpture. The idea of collage, the fundamentally original artistic procedure of the early 20th century which today informs all levels of visual life from TV commercials to Hollywood film to the fragmented experience of the shopping mall, found its perfect sculptural medium in welded steel. From the figurative abstractions of David Smith to the pictorial landscape of Anthony Caro, the relationship between architecture and sculpture was absorbed into the fundamental disunity of collage. Architecture and sculpture no longer aimed for integration, but a contrast of forms and intentions with some elements shared and others contradictory.

With the emergence of postmodernist architecture in the seventies, a new estrangement occurred. Sculptural commissions began to disappear. As architecture became more selfconscious of its appearance, in a sculptural sense, the inclusion of independent sculpture was seen as superfluous and contradictory. Postmodernism, related to architecture and proselytized by Charles Jencks, started with a fundamental and fallacious distinction between building and architecture. Building was defined as a vernacular and indigenous form, while architecture was based on a history of styles which was historically reiterated. The vocabulary of the history of architecture became the rhetoric of the surface "reading" of the building. This distinction itself reveals the current crisis facing architecture - its inability to come to terms with the social needs of contemporary life within the building itself, needs which were once the declared domain of architectural practice and consideration. In its acceptance of the natural condition of the city, including the industrial prefabrication of modular building components which have predominately come to determine the character of the spaces we live in, architecture has withdrawn to the surface where expression appears to reside, to the physiognomy of the building. This is cosmetic, not integral; it is the success of form over content, of surface over substance, and it again brings architecture into direct conflict with sculpture.

Conclusion

The current situation regarding art in the city, or art in relation to architecture, has lost some of its viability. Architecture's demonstrated self-sufficiency shows little interest in sculpture as it is now practiced. The rare sculptural commissions of a decade ago have become rarer. If we look at new construction in Vancouver over the last decade, sculpture has generally been replaced by the sunken garden

with its waterfalls and planting. *It* is striking how predictable this architectural use of public space has become. From Arthur Erickson's water walls and ceilings, to the towers on Burrard Street, water has become the contrast of choice for the curtain walls of the city. *It* has become the metaphor for the current situation of architecture itself, its status in flux - it flows, it appears to change without changing, it diffracts, it recirculates. Water provides placidity, calm and constancy, recalling the pleasure gardens of the East with their inspired tranquillity and relaxation. The sound of rushing water, its white noise blotting out the sounds of the city for a moment, bring one into that repose necessary to once again face the trials of the office. It provides, in an almost automatic way, what was once an aspiration of sculpture.

How do we account for this changed relationship? Partly it has been an unwillingness of architects to openly acknowledge the needs and desires of sculpture and the sculptural process, and partly it has been the reluctance of sculptors to adapt to the changing needs of the public space. The advantage for traditional sculpture has been the rediscovery of its place within the garden, in parks like the VanDusen Gardens. While utopian, here its relationship is continually renewed in nature without being drowned out in the city. The slow revealing of the aesthetic experience seems more suited to the natural pace of the garden which has been lost in the chaotic dynamism of the city. In a strange inversion, sculpture is to the garden what architecture is to the waterfall, as the inorganic and artificial is contrasted with the organic and natural.

The relationship between object and nature has long been appreciated. The formalization of this relationship is relatively recent leading to the idea of the autonomous sculpture park such as the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, Holland. Here each individual work appears in a clearing in the forest, connected to other clearings by a series of paths. This is an idea with roots in the aristocratic garden of the Renaissance where ideas of the sublime, and reflection within nature, took hold in the idea of the garden as a restorative for civil and courtly life. The public garden is much more recent still, owing more to the informal gardens of England on which Central Park in New York and our own Stanley Park are modeled.

Here even nature is made to fit into the city. The parks are made to appear natural in relation to the city, not to make the city appear un-natural in nature. This contradiction is the daily experience of Vancouver where nature surrounds us continually. The artificiality of the city is more difficult to hide in such a place, unlike cities such as New York which are completely artificial and where nature has been contrived to enter into the heart of the city as Central Park.



The normative experience of cities—that is, that cities appear "natural"—is now taken for granted, and the sentiment is that nothing can be done about them. The truth is that cities are not natural but are the constructs of human will, and any attempt to see them otherwise is to be blind to their actual effects.

Now, sculptural commissions, like architecture, conform to a logic of systems and planning that is more economics than art, in which the plan of the flow-chart dictates subsequent events. Almost without exception, the artist is called in at the last stages, presented with a fait accompli, and asked to fit into a pre-determined and aesthetically controlled environment. It is hardly surprising that sculpture looks the way it does, given such an onerous situation. Artists have been put in this adversarial relationship partly because of the perception that what they do is make free-standing singular objects for public spaces. This is a very narrow view of the potential of sculpture, and an equally narrow view of public experience. What is disturbing is that sculptors themselves perpetuate this understanding, perhaps inadvertently, by their insistent protection of what they perceive to be their mandate. The limits of this position - no less exclusive than that of architects - are equally injurious to the future of both practices.

The withdrawal into aesthetic hermeticism and the failure of a signifying content is disturbing. A trivial sense of meaning in practices in the public sphere is no response to the overmediated and difficult experience of contemporary life. To return to a new sense of the potential of visual experience within the city, not only in the compound of the garden, demands an understanding of the function of architecture as well as a sense of how to turn the experience of the city itself back into art. Artists like Joey Morgan in Vancouver, Martha Fleming and Lynn Lapointe in Montreal, or Dan Graham in New York, while producing work of an admittedly situationalist nature, perhaps suggest ways that this may come about as they touch on the problems of life in the city and the place of the individual in it.

If sculpture is to be relegated to a position outside the city and if postmodernism, which gives the city back its self-determined image in an acritical and ahistoric fashion, is to stand in for the humanizing and emancipatory potential of sculptural practice, then both suffer. The mere existence of sculpture is not sufficient without an accessibility that makes it understandable, not in the rhetorical sense of the most modern, but in a discursive and critical way that reclaims for sculpture its place within the city, within architecture, within the arbitration of objective experience.

The potential of sculpture is not exhausted. The desire to fashion material into objects of sensibility will endure. My concern is with its reception which becomes increasingly circumscribed, as good and bad work stand in apparent equivalence



under the rubric of the promulgation of art. It is not enough to sponsor the expansion of art as a self-regulating process through which the meaning of work will automatically emerge, without reflection.

The "reading," interpretation or hermeneutics of modern art has become, to some, a mark of its critical distance from modern life. But a misreading of this discourse has acted as a blanket endorsement for enigmatic art productions of all sorts, the mystery of which is often apocryphal. The general audience for modern work recognizes it as a sign of something beyond their comprehension, if not beyond their emotive response. The art appears to work, suspending them in a state of unease and insecurity with respect to their own knowledge - much as commercial advertising does - but without the release of active participation that consumption offers. The work's aloof and separate "otherness" positions the spectator in a mode of reception again linked to advertising; the external form, indicating "art," categorizes the experience for the viewer and closes off investigation and involvement. Again, the work's appearance as object, in a culture where artificial objects are manifestly consumed, keys into its absorption and categorization.

Artists' views of their work as emancipatory, enlightening, uplifting, no doubt form around their original intentions and are seen as such by some part of their audience. But it is the form of the work, constrained by architecture, that limits its potential expansion into the domain of public understanding and legibility. Within art schools today, there appears to be a resurgent dependence on the form and content of art of a previous generation, a reaction based on a desire for the recognizability of the known, and its consequent acceptance, without acknowledging an art that might exist beyond those traditional expectations. And yet, even those expectations may be reduced to mere sign, once the work enters the public domain.

Innovative work bears a greater burden of proof than the known. A single work, a mere indication of possible direction, is critically discussed or ignored for want of rhetorical integration; but how it actually works in the public space, and engages its audience in ways they understand, will be the key to its success, and the future success of sculpture.