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Sculpture MAGAZINE

On Exhibition Special Series, Part Three

Artist-Organized Outdoor Sculpture Exhibitions

by Jane Ingram Allen

Since the "readjustment" of the art market in the early '90s, the number of artist-organized exhibitions, especially outdoor sculpture exhibitions, has been increasing. Perhaps this is because there are so few opportunities for exhibiting outdoor work at established art exhibition sites. Sculptors all over the United States, in both urban and rural areas, are making their own opportunities. Artist-organized exhibitions of outdoor sculpture may be held in public parks, in vacant storefront windows, in empty lots, in corporate plazas, on farms, and at other spaces. Sometimes artists are doing it alone, but many are banding together in groups to organize exhibitions.



A view of Ruth Duckworth's Amorphous #1 being installed at Chicago's Pier Walk 1997.

(Background, left to right, works by Eric Lindsey, Evan Lewis, and Thomas Scarff.) Pier Walk '97/David Wagenaar

An example of sculptors initiating a successful outdoor sculpture exhibition is the show at Navy Pier, Chicago. This show, which began in 1995, is organized by sculptors Michael Dunbar and Terry Karpowicz. The Navy Pier outdoor sculpture show has expanded each year and now runs for six months with 111 pieces by artists from nine different countries. This year's exhibition is from May 7 through October 20, during the Art Expo and SOFA shows, the time period when the greatest number of art collectors, patrons, critics, and curators will be in Chicago.

Michael Dunbar, a Chicago-area sculptor, thought that the Navy Pier would be an excellent place to exhibit his own work and convinced organizers of the annual art exposition to let him and a few friends install their sculptures there during the 1995 exposition. In 1996 Dunbar and Karpowicz invited other sculptors to exhibit, and the show included 43 pieces. The Metro Pier Authority was so pleased with the exhibition that the show was extended for six months. In 1996 the artists set up a nonprofit organization called 3-D Chicago which was able to secure grant funding from foundations, the state arts council, the city of Chicago, and Sears to help with expenses. This year they had an open call for proposals which was advertised in Sculpture and other art publications. The 1997 show has 32 pieces selected from this open call as well as 79 pieces by invited artists.

One of the advantages of artists doing their own shows, Michael indicated, is that there is no curatorial agenda, and artists can experiment and try out new ideas. He continues: "We are giving artists the opportunity to show what they do. This gives a freshness and excitement to the show. Artists also know what the problems are and can work together to solve them." Michael also stated that there are not many opportunities to exhibit large outdoor works, and the Navy Pier is an excellent site with spectacular photo opportunities. 3-D Chicago is already planning for a bigger and better Navy Pier show in 1998.





Leonard Ursachi, *Untitled*, 1995. Bricks, 8 x 2 x 2 ft.

(Exhibited at the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition's 1996 Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park exhibition in Brooklyn, New York.)

The Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition (BWAC), based in Brooklyn, New York, is actually in its 15th year of producing an annual outdoor sculpture show. The exhibition is held each summer in the Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park in Brooklyn. This urban park, part of New York state's public park system, is located on the river directly across from lower Manhattan between the Manhattan Bridge and the Brooklyn Bridge.

The 1997 BWAC Outdoor Sculpture Show, titled "Between the Bridges," takes place August 2 through September 6 and features works by 22 artists selected from an open call for proposals. The sculptors exhibiting in the BWAC show do not have to be members of the group, and many come from outside the New York City area; this year there are artists from Connecticut, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Michigan, and even Germany, as well as New York state.

Scott Pfaffman, the sculptor who initiated the annual outdoor show in the park, coordinated the show for its first 10 years, from 1982 to 1992. Since then the show has had a different member in charge each year who selects the theme and curates the show with help from other members of the group and sculptors in the show. This year's curator is Jan Hoogenboom, who will also be exhibiting her work in the show.

The BWAC show in a public park is an excellent example of how artists working together can succeed in negotiating for use of space. According to Scott Pfaffman, it took two years of negotiating to get park officials to agree to have an outdoor sculpture show in the park. The first show contained only three pieces by Scott and two friends, but it was successful enough to make the park officials want to continue the exhibition. The show has been very popular with visitors to the park and has received reviews in major art publications.

The sculptors who exhibit in the BWAC show at Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park pay all of their own expenses. The artists produce a catalogue or artist's book each year to document the show. An opening reception is held in the park, and press packets and announcements are sent out each year. Sculptors are cautioned to make the works extremely durable, safe, and secure from vandals, the weather, and children playing on the sculptures. Park officials meet with the curator to discuss the works that will be in the show and to anticipate any problems with particular pieces. The park requires that all works be installed so as not to leave any mark on the park after their removal at the close of the exhibition. One sculpture in the 1996 show, an eight-by-two-by-two-foot piece made of face bricks, by Leonard Ursachi, disappeared without a trace during the exhibition; other works have been vandalized and damaged by the weather. Still, the BWAC members are committed to the exhibition and believe in its importance as a venue for exhibiting contemporary outdoor sculpture. Pfaffman notes that one advantage for sculptors exhibiting in this show is that it gives them a fantastic opportunity to photograph their work in a spectacular setting. He also emphasizes the laboratory aspect of the show and its encouragement of experimental work.



Art Attack, *Dominion Dum*, 1994.

(An abandoned farmhouse was turned into a temporary public work.)

Art Attack is another group of artists who produce their own outdoor sculpture exhibitions. Art Attack, currently based in New York City, does multimedia sculpture/installation/performance projects all over the world. In a collaborative democratic process, Art Attack artists create temporary works on site while the public watches the evolution of the piece and, many times, helps with its construction. Art Attack is now a registered nonprofit

organization, but was founded in 1979 by a small group of artists in the Los Angeles area who wanted to take art to the streets and involve the public in the process of making art. Usually three to five artists decide to work together on a specific project. The artists find a particular site and initiate a project themselves, or sometimes Art Attack is invited to do a project in a particular location. The process of working in public and negotiating with business people, corporations, and government officials to get permission to do the projects, says Lynn McCary, a founder of Art Attack, is "complicated and totally unpredictable. It can be an unexpected series of 'yeses' or doors repeatedly slammed in your face." She continues: "People are wary and suspicious of the artists and the work at first, then become very attached to the work and end up wanting to keep it forever."



Art Attack, Parallel (detail), 1996.

(One room of a project at an abandoned electric factory in Poprad, Slovakia.) art attack

In June 1997 Art Attack created a "house" on site in Columbia, Maryland, a "perfect" planned community, as part of the city's annual arts festival. During the summer and fall of 1997, Art Attack will be doing a project in Chicago, Illinois, called "Dispensing with Formalities." This project uses a newspaper box for dispensing information on the streets of Chicago. Art Attack plans to seal the box, fill it with a liquid unable to be blended and a hidden message that will have to be read through the window. People will have to shake the box to try to blend the liquid and read the message. Art Attack says this work may not survive in the public arena, "...but even 30 minutes will be a conceptual success for us." Art Attack will be doing another project in Pezinok, Slovakia, this September, titled "Common Space 2."

Ten years ago, Bob Rizzo, a sculptor in Providence, Rhode Island, started organizing outdoor sculpture exhibitions in Roger Williams Park and other downtown sites in Providence in conjunction with the city's annual arts festival "Convergence." He says he did this because there were no places in the area to show outdoor temporary work. He was working at the Parks Department as director of public programs and knew other sculptors who also wanted an opportunity to show their work. "Convergence X" which featured arts activities of all kinds as well as the outdoor sculpture exhibition, ran from June 12 to June 22, but many of the sculptures remain on view in the park and other downtown sites for up to two years.

A group of artists in the Berkshire Mountains area of western Massachusetts have for the past six years organized free public outdoor sculpture exhibitions in the garden of the Williamsville Inn in West Stockbridge, Massachusetts. This year's Williamsville Sculpture Garden exhibition, held from May 25 to October 12, is an invitational exhibition of works by 18 artists, most of whom live and work in the Berkshires or spend part of the year there. The Renaissance Guild, a local nonprofit organization of artists, organizes and coordinates the exhibition, producing a catalogue and handling sales from the show. The show is hosted each year by the Williamsville Inn which is owned by Gail Ryan, herself a former theater artist and friend of many of the area sculptors.

Sculptor's Inc., a Baltimore-based, nonprofit artists' group of about 100 members in its 14th year of operation, also organizes outdoor sculpture exhibitions. Sculptor's Inc. had an outdoor sculpture exhibition in the courtyard of the Enoch Pratt Library in the Fells Point area of Baltimore this summer. Another Sculptor's Inc. show, on the grounds of the Liriodendron Mansion in suburban Baltimore, opened June 22 and ran through August 3. A show containing both indoor and outdoor sculpture opens September 5 in Ellicott City, Maryland, and will continue through October.

Jo "Chanah" Israelson, current president of Sculptors, Inc., said that the group's function is educating the public about sculpture as well as getting exposure for its members' work. She also mentioned some of the familiar problems of exhibiting outdoor sculpture—the difficulties of transporting and installing work, the potential for vandalism, and the problems in dealing with officials and others to get permission to have the shows. However, she

believes artist-organized shows are advantageous in that they give artists the freedom to choose what they want to show with fewer restrictions. She also scoffs at the notion that artists are disorganized. "That is not true," she says, "We are becoming more professional and learning how to do it right."

One artists' group committed to helping other artists learn to organize exhibitions is the New York chapter of the Women's Caucus for Art. Last October it held a panel discussion titled "The Artist as Curator" in which members Carol Goebel, April Vollmer, and Devorah Sperber shared their experiences in curating exhibitions and offered advice for other artists wishing to curate exhibitions. The New York chapter of the Women's Caucus for Art has also been involved in organizing outdoor sculpture exhibitions. In 1995, under the leadership of Susan Grabel, it initiated the idea for a show at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center in Staten Island, New York, called "In Three Dimensions: Women Sculptors of the '90s," which included both indoor and outdoor works.

Franconia Sculpture Park in Snair, Minnesota, 45 minutes north of downtown Minneapolis, is another example of artists working together to exhibit outdoor sculpture. John Hock, Tasha McNutt, and Fuller Cowles are the three sculptors who decided to start the nonprofit sculpture park in 1996. John Hock cites the creation of Franconia Sculpture Park as an opportunity for artists to learn by working elbow-to-elbow with other artists. He also says that the park gives artists "the opportunity to work on a larger scale, both intellectually and physically. It is a new and better opportunity to experiment." (For more information about Franconia, see the article in the February 1997 issue of Sculpture.)



View of a downtown storefront window installation by Dee Carnelli

which was part of an 1996 exhibition by area sculptors in Utica, New York.

Other artists have organized sculpture exhibitions in urban storefront windows. In Utica, New York, artists Dee Carnelli and Dan Buckingham were the first to display their sculptures in vacant storefront windows along Utica's Genesee Street in early 1996. When the Olympic torch came through Utica in June of that year, other artists joined them to place their sculptures in several other vacant storefronts. Sculptures were also installed temporarily in some of the city's parks and plazas. In 1997 the sculpture exhibitions are continuing in downtown Utica as part of Utica Monday Nite, a summer-long festival of performance art, art exhibitions, and other events sponsored by the Downtown Utica Development Association and other community groups as a way to help revitalize the downtown area. This initiative by local artists to display their work in vacant storefront windows is an excellent example of how artists can contribute to urban renewal efforts.

This sort of thing has also happened in other cities. In spring 1996 artist Marion Wilson and seven other artists in Syracuse, New York, organized an exhibition called "Big Important Town"-taking the name from the dictionary definition of the word "city." "Big Important Town" took place in vacant storefronts along Syracuse's Salina Street for a month. Many of the installations, such as Wilson's piece titled Automata, Urban Poems and Other Dead Things, contained interactive elements. Again, this exhibition was a way of putting sculpture in a public space and engaging a different audience.

Many individual artists have also begun organizing and producing outdoor sculpture exhibitions of their own work. Sometimes an individual artist notices a particular site that would be great for his or her own work and begins a process of negotiating to use that space. Janet Goldner, a New York City sculptor, installed her steel sculpture, titled Most of Us Are Immigrants, in a city park on Manhattan's Lower East Side on June 29. The work, sited in Sarah D. Roosevelt Park on Houston Street between Forsythe and Chrystie, will remain on view for one year. Goldner initiated the idea, found the site, and negotiated with the parks department to have her piece installed in the park. She worked with the Roosevelt Park Community Coalition, a volunteer community group interested in revitalizing the park.



Renee van der Stelt, 7 Bridesmaid Dresses, 1996.

(Exhibited on her farm in rural Parnell, Iowa.)

Renee van der Stelt, an artist currently living in St. Paul, Minnesota, is also doing her own outdoor sculpture exhibitions. Last summer while living in rural Parnell, Iowa, just south of Iowa City, she exhibited four of her

works in a cow pasture and nearby woods. One of the works, a large installation of seven bridesmaid's dresses, provided enough visibility from the highway to attract people to come in to see her other works sited in the field and under nearby trees. The artist negotiated with her neighbors to use the land and received help from them to install the works. A farmer even cut a path with his tractor so that people could get in easily to see the sculptures. The show was up only four days, but the artist said it was well worth the effort. She got lots of positive feedback from the local people, felt that she had reached an entirely different audience, and received new insights into her work.

Some sculptors are following the example of David Smith and installing their works on their own land. Many are making these outdoor sculpture exhibitions open to the public. Dorothy Wilder, a sculptor currently living in Troy, New York, recently inherited the family farm in rural North Carolina and has begun doing public exhibitions of her work there. Last summer she installed a sculpture called Killing Fields, a multi-part installation featuring deer made of wood, brush, and deer skulls.

Of course, artists are organizing their own outdoor sculpture exhibitions because of lack of other opportunities, but many sculptors are doing this because they want to reach a different audience, engage the community, and interact with the public. Many expressed a desire to connect with a particular community, show their neighbors what they were doing and get feedback from non-art people as well as other artists. Sculptor Renee van der Stelt says her exhibition in an Iowa cow pasture was "a way of getting to know the community." Art Attack says in their statement, "From the start the idea was to engage the public by placing something new in their familiar environment." Artist Marion Wilson reiterates this idea of engaging the public by saying, "the work creates an interactive dialogue with the public; it's a way to start thinking about the role of art." Sculptor Dee Carnelli says about her installation in Utica's storefront windows: "This is reaching a different public-non-art people-the community." Sculptors are increasingly committed to exhibiting their work outdoors in public spaces. They have taken the "do-it-yourself" approach to making this happen.

Artists who have organized their own exhibitions feel that one distinct advantage is their control over how the work is seen. With most artist-organized exhibitions there are no pre-imposed curatorial themes and fewer restrictions. In some cases safety, security, and other restrictions are imposed by the owners of the property where the work is exhibited. However, in all cases the artist-organizers expressed the feeling that these shows were more experimental and provided artists more freedom to try out new ideas. As artist Michael Shaughnessy says about The Maine Artists' Space, which organizes the Forest City Annual, "It is through venues such as this that new artists can first be seen, ideas tested and thus our cultural vision broadened."

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