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**The
malignant object:
thoughts on
public sculpture**

DOUGLAS STALKER & CLARK GLYMOUR

MILLIONS of dollars are spent

in this country on public sculpture—on sculpture that is created for the explicit purpose of public viewing, placed in public settings, and constructed generally by contemporary artists without any intention of commemorating or representing people or events associated with the site. The objects in question may be clothespins, boulders, or tortuous steel shapes. The money may sometimes come from private sources, but much of it comes from public treasuries.

One of the clearest and most general attempts to provide a justification for financing and placing these objects in public spaces is given by Janet Kardon, who is the Director of Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art. "Public art," Ms. Kardon writes, "is not a style or a movement, but a compound social service based on the premise that public well-being is enhanced by the presence of large scale art works in public spaces." Large scale art works executed, to be sure, not to public taste but to the taste of the avant-garde art community. Elsewhere, she writes: "Public art is not a style, art movement or public service, but a compound event, based on the premise that our lives are enhanced by good art and that good art means work by advanced artists thrust into the public domain."¹ The justification here is moral rather than aesthetic, phrased

in terms of well-being rather than those of beauty. Public art is good for us. Her thesis is put simply and with clarity; it is perhaps the same thesis as that put forward by many writers who claim that public art "enhances the quality of life" or "humanizes the urban environment," even "speaks to the spirit."

Our view is that much public sculpture, and public art generally as it is created nowadays in the United States, provides at best trivial benefits to the public, but does provide substantial and identifiable harm. This is so for a variety of reasons having to do with the character of contemporary artistic enterprises and with prevalent features of our society as well. We will discuss these issues in due course, but for now we want to make our view as clear as we can.

There is abundant evidence, albeit circumstantial, pointing directly to the conclusion that many pieces of contemporary public sculpture, perhaps the majority, are not much enjoyed by the public at large—even though the public firmly believes in a general way that art is a very good thing. In short, the outright aesthetic benefits are few and thin. Perhaps the public is wrong in its distaste or indifference, perhaps members of the public *ought* to take (in some moral sense, if you like) more pleasure in these objects thrust upon them, but these questions are wholly beside the point. Government, at whatever level, only has a legitimate interest in publicly displaying contemporary art in so far as that display provides *aesthetic* benefits to the citizenry. Many artists, critics and art administrators think otherwise, and claim for contemporary public sculpture, and for contemporary art more generally, various intellectual, pedagogical, or economic virtues which are appropriate for the state to foster. By and large the objects in question have no such virtues, so even if governments did wish to foster them, they could not properly or efficiently do so by placing contemporary sculpture in public environs. Further, there are identifiable harms caused by public contemporary art. These harms are akin in structure, though perhaps not in degree, to the harms often said to be caused by the public display of pornography. After considering the arguments developed subsequently, we hope the reader will conclude that this last contention is not so outrageous as it may seem to be at the outset. Thus, our argument runs, public contemporary sculpture does little or nothing to enhance the quality of life generally, and governments have no intrinsic interest in promoting it. Whatever legitimacy there is to government support of such displays derives from the tradition of serving the special interests of a very limited group of citizens—those served,

for example, by museums of contemporary art. But this justification is overwhelmed by the fact that publicly displayed contemporary sculpture causes significant offense and harm, and does so in a way that intrudes repeatedly into people's normal living routines.

Doubtless some people will misread our argument and take it to be an attack on contemporary art *per se*. Our reasoning in no way depends on whether contemporary art is in general good or bad, or on whether particular pieces are or are not good art. It depends only on the facts (or what we claim to be facts) that much of the public derives minimal aesthetic pleasure from such contemporary art as is publicly displayed, that a significant segment of the public is offended and harmed by such displays, and that governments have, in these circumstances, no legitimate interest in furthering *public* art. Accordingly, this view is in no way a denigration of contemporary art; it is, however, a denigration of certain accounts of the value of that art, specifically those which find in the works of various artists, or schools of artists, vital lessons which the public desperately needs to learn.

Public opinion of public sculpture

Contemporary public art is public *contemporary* art, and there is considerable evidence that the communities into which it is "thrust" do not revere it, like it, or (sometimes) even tolerate it. Examples abound, and we offer only a few that are representative.

In October 1980 a piece of public statuary was unveiled in Wilmington, Delaware. The piece was executed by Richard Stankiewicz, known for his "junk" art of the 1950's. The unveiling was received with cat-calls and denunciations from much of the public audience. In Pittsburgh, there has been popular, organized resistance to a proposal to build a piece of modern cement sculpture on a vacant lot on the North Side of the city. The people of the North Side, a middle-class working community, want a fountain not a piece of modern sculpture. (It may or may not be relevant that the sculptor is not a resident of the community, but lives in the Squirrel Hill district of Pittsburgh, a predominantly affluent and academic neighborhood.)

Alexander Calder and Claes Oldenburg have each left a work in the city of Chicago. One rarely hears anything good said of them by Chicagoans who dwell outside of the Art Institute of Chicago. Away from the shadows and in the sunshine of the Letter-to-the-Editor columns, there is dismay at Calder's "Flamingo" and Olden-

burg's "Batcolumn." But the public dislike for these works hardly compares with the crescendo of distaste for a recent exercise in "Rag Art" at Chicago's Federal Building. A typical response to the exhibition bears quoting:

Q. Please tell me how to complain about those unsightly canvas rags that have been wrapped around the pillars of the John C. Luzinski Federal Building. Those rags are a disgrace. While you're at it, what's all that scrap metal doing strewn around? Many blind people go in and out of the building, and it's a wonder no one trips over this garbage.

F. G., Franklin Park²

The *Chicago Sun-Times* kindly informed the resident of Franklin Park that "the rags and scrap metal are objects d'art," which would have to be tolerated through December of 1978. And so into the winter of that year pedestrians in the Second City had to suffer the assaults of both the elements and the artistes.

In 1977, Carl Andre, the well-know "minimal" artist, executed a public sculpture for the city of Hartford, Connecticut for \$87,000. Andre's "Stone Field Sculpture" consists of 36 boulders deposited in rows on a lawn. Mr. Andre has assured us privately that "Stone Field Sculpture" seems to have settled rather nicely into Hartford, and that there is no real public outrage directed at it. His assurance notwithstanding, the *Hartford Courant* was filled with articles like these in the summer and fall of 1977: "Criticisms of Park Art Doesn't Rock Sculptor"; "Sculpture Foes Shaping Plans"; "Rock Opponents Tighten Stand." Taking note of this public indignation and even joining it, the city fathers considered refusing payment but were advised by attorneys that the contract with Andre was valid and binding. Works by Sugarman, Ginnevar, di Suvero, and other sculptors have created even more intense controversy in other cities, not simply because the public objected to paying for the works, but because significant segments did not want the objects publicly displayed in the settings into which they had been, or were to be, thrust. (These cases, and many more, are recorded apologetically in Donald W. Thalacker's book, *The Place of Art in the World of Architecture*.)

The public distaste for today's public sculpture often goes well beyond mere words. The common responses include petitions, assemblies, litigation, and, occasionally, direct action. Enraged by what is thrust at them, the public often takes up a kind of vigilantism against contemporary public sculpture, and in community after community spontaneous bands of Aesthetic Avengers form, armed

with hammers, chisels, and spray-paint cans. Jody Pinto's "Heart Chambers for Gertrude and Angelo," erected on the University of Pennsylvania campus for Ms. Kardon's own Institute of Contemporary Art, was turned into rubble overnight. Barnett Newman's "Broken Obelisk" was rapidly defaced when it was put on display in 1967. Removed to Houston, Texas, it is now placed in a pool away from errant paint. Claes Oldenburg's "Lipstick" was so thoroughly defaced at Yale that the sculptor retrieved it. Of course, for any object there is some thug or madman willing or eager to destroy what he can of it, but the defacement of some pieces of public sculpture seems to enjoy a measure of community support or at least tolerance.

The examples could be continued into tedium. On the whole, the public does not like today's public art. Of course, some people do actually take pleasure in "Batcolumn" or in the twisted, painted tubes and rusted shards that can be found in almost every large American city. But the vast majority, convinced that art is a good thing, still takes no pleasure in the actual pieces of public art themselves. An expensive piece of contemporary sculpture has a life cycle of a predictable kind, a cycle frequently noted by others. Received with joy by a small coterie of aesthetes and with indignation by a sizable element of the community, the sculpture soon becomes an indifferent object, noticed chiefly by visitors. If it is very elaborate or very expensive, the local citizenry may try to take whatever minimal aesthetic pleasure they can from the thing; typically, after all, they paid a bundle for it. In time the aesthetes move on, no longer interested in a piece that is *derrière-garde*. But the public must remain.

Impressionistic evidence is rightfully mistrusted, and those who advocate public sculpture might well demand more precise evidence as to the extent and intensity of public dislike or indifference for contemporary public sculpture. But the plain fact is that there is little non-impressionistic evidence to be had, one way or the other. Remarkably, although considerable sums are spent on public sculpture in this country by government and by corporations, virtually nothing is spent to find out whether or not the public likes particular objects or dislikes them, how intense such feelings are, or, most importantly, what proportion of the affected public would prefer that the space be put to some other use.

Louis Harris's polling organization has taken three extensive opinion surveys since 1973 dealing with attitudes towards art and its accessibility. None of these opinion surveys address questions deal-

ing with the reception of public sculpture. The 1973 survey asks for responses to a number of items about "visual pollution," but no opportunity was given for respondents to indicate whether or not they found leaning girders or canvas rags to be a form of visual pollution. For any serious purpose in evaluating the impact of public art, the Harris surveys are quite useless. The only attempt at a useful survey on the impact of contemporary public sculpture is reported by Margaret Robinette, who conducted a survey during 1972 and 1973.³ Though her pilot study does address the reception of contemporary public sculpture, it is without value as evidence regarding the issues raised here. The sampling procedure almost certainly produced a biased sample, the questions did not ask respondents to consider the sculpture against a range of alternatives, and even so the results cannot be unequivocally interpreted as evidence of public pleasure in contemporary public art. Indeed, the results provide internal evidence that many of the respondents did not fully understand the import of some of the most important questions put to them. In lieu of better studies of the same kind, we have the impressionistic evidence of letters to the editors of newspapers, of recorded public controversies, of organized public opposition to particular pieces of contemporary public art. There is no *prima facie* reason to doubt that this opposition is generally sincere, fairly widespread, and sometimes even thoughtful.

Monuments to the mundane

What basis can there be, then, for the claim that contemporary public sculpture enhances public well-being? The most obvious value of an aesthetic object—the aesthetic pleasure in seeing it and touching it and living with it—is apparently not present in today's public sculpture. By and large, the members of the public feel no pleasure, or very little, in seeing and touching and having such things. What else can be said in Ms. Kardon's defense? Perhaps that people become accustomed to public sculpture. After a piece has been in place for a while, the outrage, the shouts, the complaints cease. Children play on the thing if it can be played on. Old people may sit by it. This is a sorry defense, in which people's adaptability, and their impotence to control their environs, is used against them. People will, in fact, make what they can of *almost anything*, no matter how atrocious or harmful, if they have no choice. They will adapt to burned out tenements, to garbage in the streets, to death on the sidewalks. However horrible, tasteless,

pointless, or insipid an object may be, if children can make a plaything of it they will. Bless them, not the artists.

Today's public sculpture, like the rest of contemporary art, is often defended for its intellectual value, for what the piece says or expresses, rather than for what it looks like. If this is to be any serious defense at all, it must be shown that typical pieces—or at least *some* pieces—of contemporary public sculpture are saying something serious and interesting, and doing so in a way that makes what is being expressed especially accessible to the public. None of these requirements is met—and moreover these requirements are *obviously* not met—by today's public sculpture.

Attempts to articulate the thought expressed by various pieces are, virtually without exception, trivial or fatuous or circular. Consider some remarks in *Newsweek* in defense and interpretation of a notable piece of public art: "Claes Oldenburg's work—his 'Bat-column' in Chicago, for example—is formally strong as well as ironic. Oldenburg's silly subjects state a truth often overlooked: inside those self-important glass boxes, people are really thinking hard about such things as baseball bats or clothes-pins." We have no evidence that this is not the very thought that occurs to people when they see Oldenburg's column—but we doubt it. But even if it were, it is a patently trivial thought, and if the object is justified by the expression rather than the sensation, would not a small sign have been in better taste? The author continues, "Among other things, a work like Athena Tacha's 'Streams' in Oberlin, Ohio, reminds people, through its uneven steps, of what it means to walk."⁴ Tacha's work is at least pleasing to our eyes, but we have not yet been reminded of what it "means" to walk. But if uneven steps will do the trick, the meaning can be found in any city park, forest path, or homebuilt staircase. Why do we need monuments to the mundane? Why should the public pay for what it can get for free?

It is impossible, and in any case too painful, to examine the range of pretentious, vapid claims made by professional art critics for the intellectual content of contemporary sculpture. Much of it reads like the prose of ambitious students of a Schaumm's Outline on "Wittgenstein Made Simple" or "Beginning Phenomenology," or "Quantum Mechanics Made Simple." It is not serious. An example or two will have to suffice.

The late critic and sculptor Robert Smithson has written about the Park Place Group of sculptors, which includes Mark di Suvero, who has done a number of public sculptures (including "Moto Viget" in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and "Under Sky/One Family," Balti-

more) in the leaning girder style. Smithson claims that the members of the Group "research a cosmos modeled after Einstein. . . . Through direct observation, rather than explanation, many of these artists have developed ways to treat the theory of sets, vectorial geometry, topology and crystal structure." Smithson also claims that these and other modern sculptors celebrate "entropy" or "energy-drain."⁵ Taken literally, this is somewhere between unlikely and silly. What is a "cosmos modeled after Einstein"? A cosmos modeled after some solution to the field equations of general relativity? Which solution, of the infinity of them, and why that one? Do these sculptors really know *anything* about relativity? Perhaps. Perhaps di Suvero and company really do have some deep understanding of quantum theory, general relativity, and transfinite cardinals, but even that unlikely contingency will not justify the imposition of their art upon the public. There is no interesting lesson about these subjects which the citizen can be expected to draw from simple geometrical shapes cast together in a public place. That is simply the fact of the matter, and it guts any attempt to found the benefits of public art upon the thin and far fetched theories of certain art critics. For what is undeniable about nearly every critical account of the message of one or another school of contemporary art is that the message—whether it is about physics or philosophy—is *esoteric*, and cannot be garnered from any amount of gazing at, climbing on, or even vandalizing of the object.

More failed justifications

Inevitably, today's public sculpture is justified in a kind of circular way: The very fact that the public dislikes it, or even violently abhors it, is taken to warrant its presentation. Thus Jody Pinto, rather typically, remarked after her sculpture at the University of Pennsylvania was destroyed that "Tons of letters were written to the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, both pro and con, which is wonderful. If art can stimulate that kind of discussion and really make people think, then it's accomplished probably more than most artists could even hope for."⁶ Thus the justification for public art is that it causes people to think about why they do not like it, or about the propriety of having destroyed it. That is indeed a virtue, one supposes, but a virtue shared quite as much by every calamity.

There is also the common suggestion that, like travel, contemporary art in public places is broadening. It introduces the public to the fact that there are other and different tastes and sensitivities,

alternative and unconventional standards of beauty. It makes people *tolerant*. In fact, there is no case at all that public sculpture makes people tolerant of anything that matters. Today's public sculpture may well make people tolerant of public sculpture, for the simple reason that if the object is too large, too strong, or too well fortified, they have no choice. Does it make people tolerant of, or sensitive to, the aesthetic expectations of other cultures or times? One doubts that it does, and surely not as well as an exhibition of Chinese calligraphy, or American ghetto art, or Tibetan dance, or the treasures of King Tut.

It is sometimes urged, rather opaquely, that there are significant economic benefits to be derived from public art. The case is seldom developed in any detailed fashion, and there is good reason to doubt that public support of permanent or quasi-permanent public art structures can lean very much on such considerations. These are some of the reasons.

First, the presence of public sculpture in booming areas is not evidence that the art itself makes significant contributions to the economies of Winston-Salem, or Charlotte, or Seattle. The effect is most likely in the other direction. (The same holds, of course, for the performing arts. As Dick Netzer remarks, "It is hard to believe that the presence of the Charlotte Symphony has much, if anything, to do with that area's booming economy."⁷)

Second, while art may provide economic benefits for a few centers where the variety, or quality, or number of objects and events is markedly better than in surrounding areas, it cannot have much economic effect when more widely and, from the point of view of public patronage, more justly distributed. People may very well go to St. Louis to view its arch, but how many now go to Oberlin, Ohio, to see Tacha's "Streams" or to Chicago to see "Batcolumn"?

Third, those who point to the alleged economic benefits of public art almost always neglect to consider opportunity costs: Would the money spent on public art have produced greater economic benefits if it had been invested in capital equipment or in subsidies for business or for public transit or in amusement parks? And, finally, even in those circumstances where the availability of cultural amenities provides or would provide significant economic benefits, there is no evidence that public sculpture of the sort bedecking our cities and towns contributes very significantly to that benefit. The forms of artistic culture which attract people and their money may very well be, as it seems to us, chiefly those of museums, music, and theatre.

Ms. Kardon's claims for the benefits of public art are unjustified and unjustifiable, and they can only result from a failure to be candid about the social conditions of contemporary art. Contemporary art has a small audience composed of some of the very rich who can afford to buy it and some of the not-so-very rich who go to galleries and museums to see it. The audience for this art takes pleasure in it for any of several not very complex reasons: because of the aesthetic appeal of a particular object, because of an interest in a segment of cultural history, because of the notoriety of its creator, because they find it an amusing joke (on other people), or perhaps, simply because they have been led to believe that they *ought* to enjoy it.

The aesthetic pleasures of contemporary art are not shared generally or widely, and the citizenry who must pay for and daily observe a public sculpture can take no pleasure in a joke played on others; for if Mr. Andre's "Stone Field Sculpture" is a joke, it is a joke played on the citizens of Hartford themselves. Some people, attending to the histories of past art that has proved to be great art, might be more tolerant about the untoward reactions to "Stone Field Sculpture" and its equivalents. Monet and Renoir caused quite a stir in their time, and the public did not take much pleasure in their works. Yet many of these same paintings have proved in time to be good, even great, art. Indeed, believing that this is a recurring and prevalent course of events with novel art in any form and time, it might seem prudent to take a different view of adverse reactions to our revolutionary and experimental works of public sculpture. This would be a mistake, for the appeal to art history wholly misses the point at issue: It is not for government to promote new conceptions or realizations of art. In short, the ultimate aesthetic quality of the works is not in question; their public display is.

The propriety of government support

If today's public sculpture is not much enjoyed for its aesthetic qualities, and if it carries no effective and important message which will enlighten the public, how does it improve the quality of life? How are citizens made better off by its presence? Advocates may dig in their heels and claim that those exposed to such pieces just *are* better off, whether they know it or not, for seeing and living with the things. But an inarticulate and unidentifiable benefit is no benefit at all, only special pleading.

Government at various levels may be legitimately concerned to promote the public welfare, but it cannot be legitimately concerned to promote activities with no demonstrable or even very plausible connection with the well-being of the citizenry. The argument for public art fails entirely if it is based on considerations of direct general welfare. What remains to be said in defense of public sculpture is only a kind of analogy. Governments at various levels support museums, even museums wholly or partly given over to contemporary art, and such support is ordinarily thought to be entirely proper. The public at large is thought to benefit by having art collections available, and a small segment of the public does benefit from active and repeated use of such collections. Why, it might reasonably be asked, is public sculpture any different? Granted that only a small segment of the population actively enjoys the things, why should not the government support that interest while providing to others the benefits of availability in case they change their minds or their tastes? The answer brings us to another conclusion: The objects of contemporary public sculpture are not benign or indifferent.

Public sculpture presents *moral* issues which outstrip related questions, such as those associated with the social justice or injustice of public funding of the arts, exactly because the works of public art are indeed thrust upon the public. They are unavoidable; if one goes about one's normal routine in Pittsburgh or Denver or New York or Grand Rapids one *will* see public sculpture, willy-nilly, like it or not. The moral questions associated with the public display of large pieces of contemporary art are rather like the moral issues surrounding the public display of pornography. The analogy between public contemporary art and public pornography is revealing, and we will pursue it, not because we believe that the harms caused by public contemporary art are the same harms as those caused by public pornography, but because the different harms in the two cases arise in similar ways, and belong to similar categories.

Public sculpture, public pornography

The public display of pornography is widely claimed to cause several kinds of harm in several ways. In the first place, merely seeing pornographic depictions of events offends many people who do the seeing. The offensiveness of these displays to such people is at least partly aesthetic—it involves their immediate repugnance at what they perceive. (It is in that way different from the repug-

nance which is expressed by evangelical prudes at anyone, anywhere, gazing upon pornographic displays, no matter how much pleasure the gazer may find.) There are philosophers, such as Joel Feinberg, who treat offenses of this kind as something other than harms, but we see no real basis for sustaining such a distinction.⁸ An offense given is a harm done, however minor and relatively unimportant a harm it may be.

Second, the public display of pornography is claimed to have a kind of reflective effect on some people. On reflection, if one is a woman, one is *humiliated* by the depiction of women as simply and rightfully objects of lust who are nothing more than sexual slaves. Third, the public display of pornography is claimed to have indirect effects which do substantial harm: It is alleged to promote sex crimes, for example, and to cause or to sustain the repression of women and discrimination against them. More clearly, the public display of pornography violates the interests of those who value modesty, who are offended by pornographic displays, and who wish society not to develop in such a way that immodesty and pornography are ubiquitous. The public display of pornography can be reasonably expected to contribute to the further erosion of taboos against immodesty and public sexuality in various forms, and thus to cause the evolution of society in such a way that is inimical to the interests of those who prefer a society whose members confine their eroticism to private circumstances. These are rather familiar objections to public pornography, and anyone who has thought or talked much of the subject has met versions of them. Most have a valid analogue in public art.

A good deal of today's public sculpture offends the public eye. It offends twice: once because it is simply unsightly, as with garbage, auto salvage yards, and scrap heaps; and again because it is unsightly *art*. It is offensive to be presented with rags and scrap metal, but perhaps equally offensive to be told that an unsightly mess must be respected as art. What the gentleman from Franklin Park felt in downtown Chicago may perhaps not be fairly characterized as revulsion, but he was surely offended by the art objects, quite as genuinely as are those who must pass by drive-in theaters exhibiting pornographic films.

There is a related harm of the second kind, a reflective harm which is a kind of insult or humiliation. Viewing public sculpture and finding it ugly or silly or simply commonplace, the common person brings his own eye and mind into direct conflict with the judgment of the aesthetic and political authorities. He can only

draw one of three conclusions. Either his own judgment is hopelessly flawed, so that he is a complete aesthetic incompetent; or else that of the authorities is flawed in like fashion; or, finally, he and his fellow citizens have been made the butt of a joke by the artist, his associates, and his admirers. The second conclusion is not widely held, though it is a logical possibility, and is doubtless sometimes true. In the first case, the citizen can only be humiliated by an object which, try as he will, he cannot find the beauty of; in the third case, he can only be insulted and righteously indignant at those who have erected an object which is an expression of contempt for the public. Both to the timid and to the self-confident, the object acts with malice. We are not sure that the harm associated with the humiliation and insult given by public sculpture is altogether less intense than the humiliation some people feel at public pornography. And the harm is repeated and repeated and repeated. The citizen can only escape by moving his domicile or work or normal activities, or by cultivating indifference.

In a third way, as well, the erection of public sculpture of the contemporary kind harms the interests of citizens who find it offensive: It begets more of the same. It does so directly by means of artistic influence, through mechanisms familiar to everyone. It does so indirectly by influencing the sense of beauty in the youthful, and thus causing them to welcome more of the same. Everyone has an interest in society developing in such a way that his own aesthetic sensibilities are not everywhere outraged; for much of the citizenry, most works of today's public sculpture act against that interest.

The iconoclast at large

The harm done by public sculpture to the interests of the public is real harm, less vivid and perhaps less important than some other social harms, but real enough. To those harms we have noted, we must add the general harm, in the case of publicly financed public sculpture, of having to finance an object from which no benefit is derived, and the special exquisiteness of having to finance one's own humiliation. We should also note that the forms of resistance to public sculpture are rather like the forms of resistance to public pornography: People write letters, hold rallies, circulate petitions, sue, and deface. In short, the analogy between public contemporary art and public pornography should not be lightly dismissed, for it is sound. This is not to say that there are no occasions when a public

SOCRATIC SCULPTURE?

The students at Northern Illinois University in rustic De Kalb, Ill., may not be connoisseurs of modern art, but they know what they don't like.

What they don't like is "Six Questions," an enormous modern sculpture made of rusted steel that recently was plopped down in front of the student union. The work is in the shape of a simple table, waist-high and 48 feet long, with benches on either side.

The six questions, cut into the table top like so many graffiti, are: "Do you need a bath?" "Are you going home?" "Do you cry?" "Have you been introduced?" "What is your next move?" "Do you know the facts?"

The piece was selected by the student association's art acquisition committee. Even before it arrived, the student paper, *The Northern Star*, was lambasting the work and its \$10,000 price. "At \$200 a foot for a picnic table, it's pretty ritzy dining," wrote Phil Jurik, the managing editor. He quoted a friend as asking: "If the table is 48 feet long, how big are the ants?"

As a crane lowered the sculpture into place, students gathered to jeer, and a young man later tried to deface the work. He kicked it from beneath, jumped up and down on it, and only stopped after knocking off a piece of metal. The piece was welded back into place.

Students expressed wrath that the sculpture was paid for out of their fees. "I think it's a waste, considering they've had to cut back buses for students even though they just raised our fees," griped Jean Marie Gallagher, a junior majoring in accounting. Besides, she adds, "I'm not sure it's art. It looks like a piece of rusted-out metal."

Dissatisfaction wasn't universal, though. Three students jointly wrote a letter to the student newspaper praising the work as "portraying a reflection of everybody's experience." The three also quoted modern artist Robert Rauschenburg: "If the painting doesn't upset you, it probably wasn't a good painting to begin with."

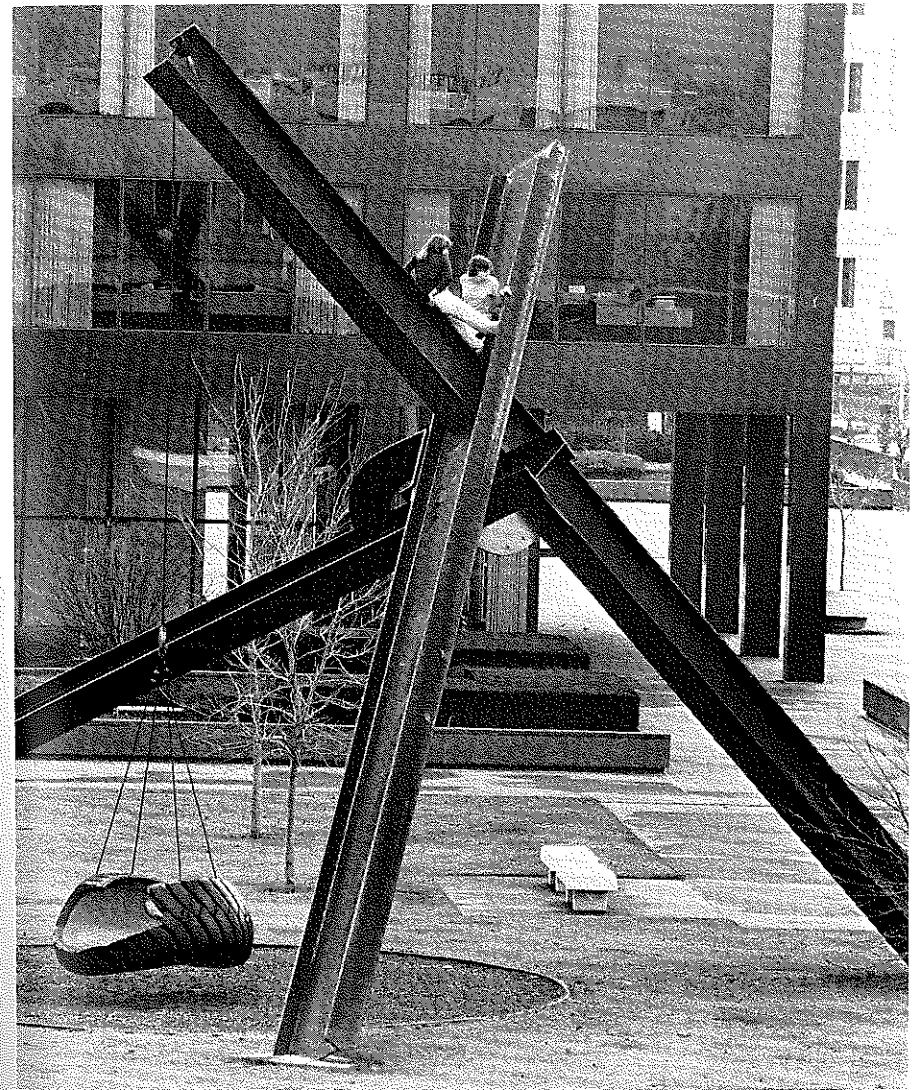
The creator of "Six Questions," Minneapolis sculptor Steven Beyer, happens to agree. "I wanted the questions to stick with them, so they'd wonder about them later," says Mr. Beyer, who explains that he based the questions on the hierarchy of human needs established by psychologist Abraham Maslow.

The table is meant to suggest a cafeteria rather than a picnic, says Mr. Meyer, adding, "The work represents a dialogue, because as people sit on opposite sides, the questions sit between them. College is about a lot of dialogue, searching questions, and all that."

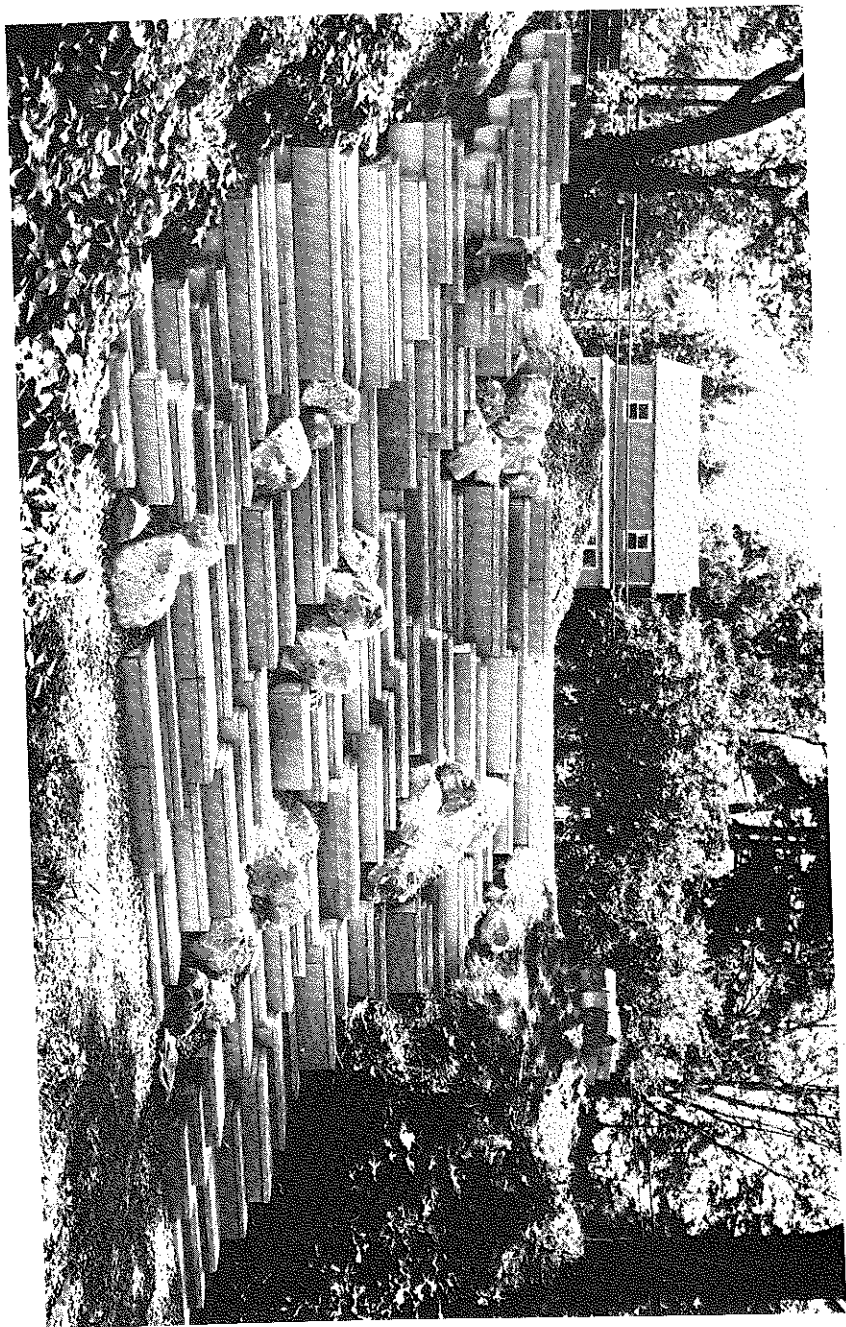
—The Wall Street Journal
Oct. 19, 1981.

sculpture, even a contemporary public sculpture, is by intent or by chance so executed that it catches the public taste, pleases many, and offends few. Undoubtedly, there are such happy events, but the impressionistic evidence we find, at any rate, is that they are extremely rare.

If it is a banal observation that today's public art violates public tastes, a less banal contention is that this is not a benign or indifferent conflict, but one that is genuinely inimical to the public interest. The explanation of the banality is straightforward, but it serves to remind us why, unless either avant-garde art or public interests change dramatically, the harms are inevitable. Much of the business of contemporary artists has been to locate a tacit con-



Mark di Suvero, *Motu Viget*, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
Photo by *The Grand Rapids Press*.



Athena Tacha, *Streams*, Oberlin, Ohio.
Photo courtesy of the Zabriskie Gallery, New York.



George Segal, *The Restaurant*, Buffalo, New York.
Photo courtesy of the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York.

straint on the prevalent sense of what is artful, a limitation on the sense of beauty, and to deliberately execute an object that violates that constraint yet somehow still retains an aesthetic appeal. Done brilliantly, the results can be admirable, and the retention of a fragment of what pleases old sensibilities, in combination with new forms, can lead to new and original aesthetic values. But such art cannot be iconographic in traditional and, to many, out-moded ways. This does not mean that it must discard representation and realism in favor of non-objectivity and abstraction. Rather, impertinent or irrelevant iconography and realism can be one way for art to be iconoclastic.

Two of George Segal's public sculptures illustrate the point. Both his "The Steelmakers" and "The Restaurant" represent ordinary scenes in realistic ways: in the first case two steelworkers laboring at an open hearth, and in the second case three people arranged around a restaurant façade. The steelworkers seem obviously pertinent and relevant to their place and purpose, which is serving as a monument to the main industry of Youngstown, Ohio. The restaurant figures, however, seem plainly ill-suited and ill-placed outside the Federal Building in Buffalo, New York. The latter does not, nor does other iconoclastic work, realize and celebrate and exemplify a common tradition and shared political, cultural, and aesthetic heritage. That is what public sculpture is expected to do, and what iconoclastic art can never do. Put otherwise, contemporary art is essentially experimental art. It is not valued by those who care about it because its objects are new and exquisite applications of enduring and precise requirements and constraints. It is valued at least largely for its very novelty. The public has no wish to be made guinea-aesthetes.

The question of art policy

The harm done by the public display of contemporary sculpture far outweighs the benefits such displays afford to a certain segment of the public, chiefly the benefit of seeing the sculpture without having to visit a museum or art park. Though some would think otherwise, this state of affairs does not even really present a question of regulating activities which give offense: We regulate dress, noise, architecture, advertising displays, smoking in public places, and so on, because such things can give general offense or do harm, and the harms are taken to outweigh the benefits to the offender. In the case of public sculpture, publicly supported, it is only a question of not *subsidizing* an activity that gives offense and does harm.



Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, New York City.
Photo by Neal Boenzi/NYT Pictures.

Consider an apt but unpleasant analogy. It is widely thought to be outrageous that, fully knowing the harms done by smoking, the government continues to subsidize the growing of tobacco, thereby helping to harm many seriously while providing benefits of a less vital kind for a few. The government has no *intrinsic* interest in the growing of tobacco, and it can offer no other just considerations than those involved in the balancing of benefits and harms. In structure, it is quite the same with today's public art: The government has no intrinsic interest in the promulgation of contemporary art, and it can only justify its subsidies by an appeal to a balance of benefits and harms to the citizenry. The most relevant difference, of course, is that the harms of public sculpture are less serious and less well-established than those of tobacco use. In the case of public art, privately supported, different issues will naturally arise, chiefly those of the appropriate and proper uses of private property, and of the resolution of the conflicts that arise when actual or proposed uses are inimical to the interests of those who do not own the property. The only consequence of our argument is a *caveat* about the resolution of such conflict: Based on the fact that what is to be constructed is *art*, government should not give extra weight to the claims of owners who would also be public exhibitors.

It is one thing to recognize a harm, quite another to understand how to incorporate that recognition within public policy. Lawrence Alloway, who recognizes the public distaste for today's public sculpture, but who does not take account of the harm to the public, claims that public sculpture will be defaced if it can be.⁹ Consequently, he proposes that a public sculpture should be invulnerable or inaccessible. One might as soon conclude that it should be well-policed. In the present order of things, in which public art is indeed thrust upon the public without any direct requirement that the public favor the object, Alloway's recommendation is no more than an injunction to overcome the public antipathy by physical means, and to take from the people even the desperate recourse of Aesthetic Vengeance.

There are other remedies. Zoning is a common solution to the problem of public displays or advertisements of pornography. It is possible to apply the same solution to public sculpture—indeed, one might say that the solution is already in force in upstate New York, where two hundred acres near the town of Lewiston have been set aside as "Artpark," a place for contemporary sculptors to display their wares to the public should it care to see them. One might also say that the solution is already in force elsewhere, but

not strictly enough, for galleries and museums congregate in a common area in many cities.

Alloway also appears to endorse the direct involvement of the public in the selection of public sculpture, so that after solicitation of proposals, the public can determine by preferential voting which pieces of sculpture are to be executed. Something like this procedure was used, as Alloway notes, for selecting sculpture for the West Side of New York City. But Alloway's proposal seems to us entirely half-hearted and tacitly paternalistic. The public has no *a priori* interest in the erection of sculpture on public sites, as against playgrounds or fountains or unadorned parks or monuments. There is no justification for the presentation to the public of a body of proposals for sculpture exclusive of other alternatives. In the great majority of cases, we believe any fair public plebiscite would have turned against *any* contemporary sculpture, and in favor of more benign objects: swings and slides and trees.

We do not offer a particular mechanism for representing public tastes and preferences in decisions about public aesthetics, and we scarcely believe that there is a single correct procedure. What we do insist is that public preference not be discounted by government agencies and that special pleadings on behalf of the art community be recognized for what they are.

The place of reason

By and large, the art community has addressed the issues we have raised only obliquely and disingenuously—as problems of salesmanship. This stance often shows up in articles that appear in art magazines whose audience is primarily the artistic community. In content if not in style, these discussions of public distaste for contemporary public sculpture are very much akin to discussions of "market resistance" in industrial trade magazines. An unmistakable instance of this focus on salesmanship is a recent suggestion that the friends of public sculpture should try to develop a tradition of contemporary public pieces in a community by introducing first one, then another, and then yet other and even more contemporary works.¹⁰ In brief order, this sort of sculpture will, by its very numbers, come to dominate public areas and perhaps seem to the public familiar, expected, and appropriate. This seems nothing more than the standard corporate strategy of market proliferation to secure increased sales, indeed to dominate the marketplace for a certain type of product, be it cigarettes or breakfast cereals.

Big time art is an industry that has moved out of the cottage, an industry that has an articulate and influential lobby at many levels of government. That industry has captured a piece of the public purse, quite as surely as have the tobacco farmers and dairy-men, and thereby has obtained a substantial and diverse subsidy. Like some purloined letter, the most hidden part of that subsidy lies out in the open: It is the cost to those who must regularly view contemporary public sculpture and endure whatever harm it occasions them. If large scale sculptures were required to be housed behind walls, or away from the course of daily routine, the real costs of these pieces would be more evident. Instead, public display transforms internal costs into external ones which are diffused, subjective, and not easily measured.

Artists, critics, and art administrators may find this argument to be simply an endorsement of philistinism, but that is a grievous confusion. Philistines are people too, and, whether or not one shares their tastes, the moral point of view requires that their interests be considered. If art is serious then aesthetic values must interact with moral values and aesthetic reactions must also help determine moral obligations. The artistic community generally is constitutionally allergic to close argument and clear statement, preferring allusion and non-sequitur. But any serious discussion about art and social obligation cannot be so self-indulgent, and that is why we have found Ms. Kardon's statements so welcome. If there is a serious defense of the view that today's public art enhances public well-being, it is not enough to presuppose it, allude to it, imply it, or suggest it. Give it.

NOTES

1. See the introduction to the booklet *Urban Encounters: A Map of Public Art in Philadelphia, 1959-1979* (Philadelphia: Falcon Press, 1980); also the introduction to the brochure for the exhibition "Urban Encounters: Art Architecture Audience," Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, March 19-April 30, 1980.
2. "Action Time" column, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, November 6, 1978. For a complaint about "Flamingo" and "Batcolumn," see the "Action/reaction" column, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, November 10, 1978.
3. The Harris surveys are *Americans and the Arts: A Survey of Public Opinion, Americans and the Arts 1975*, and *Americans and the Arts*, available from the American Council for the Arts. Margaret Robinette's survey is presented in her book *Outdoor Sculpture: Object and Environment* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1976).
4. "Sculpture Out in the Open," *Newsweek*, August 8, 1980, p. 71.
5. Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979) pp. 9, 17, 18.

6. "I Don't Think of Myself As a Stevedore," an interview by Maralyn Polak in *Today Magazine*, February 1, 1981, p. 8.
7. Dick Netzer, *The Subsidized Muse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) p. 161.
8. Joel Feinberg, *Social Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973) pp. 41-45.
9. "The Public Sculpture Problem" in Lawrence Alloway's collection *Topics in American Art Since 1945* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975) pp. 245-250.
10. Kate Linker, "Public Sculpture II: Provisions For Paradise," *Artforum*, Summer 1981, pp. 38-39.

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