# FOREVER IS JUST FOR NOW

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I'm struck by how different art and the urban environment and the relationship between them appear in London and New York. In London, history is so visible a fact of life in city buildings and urban sculptures, that it disappears into some recess of semi-consciousness. But the YBAs are so exciting and so present that it seems that today's intensity of excitement over contemporary art and particular artists will ever be so.

In New York, on the other hand, an old building may be 100 years old but is probably 15, and we are so accustomed to yet another crop of young geniuses that we have learned to wait patiently, because, as Mark Twain once said of New England, if you don't like the weather, wait a minute. It used to take a decade for the art weather to change. The ascendency of abstract expressionism lasted from Willem de Kooning's black and white painting show at the Eagan gallery in 1948 until Jasper Johns' exhibition of targets and flags at the Castelli Gallery in 1958. But David Salle, Eric Fischl, and neo geo hardly outlasted the mid 1980s, and where is post modernism now?

With public sculpture it is otherwise. Our history is new - certainly compared to all of yours - and our public sculpture has not rushed to fill in the empty urban spaces, scarce as they have become, in the last century or two. We do, of course, have the statue of Liberty, thank you France, and Alice in Wonderland spreads her bronze skirts in Central Park so that children can clamber over her. We have our horses, and generals, and generals on horseback. We have a bronze Chinaman in Chinatown and a quite appalling remnant of colonialism in front of the

Museum of Natural History, in which Teddy Roosevelt rides a horse at whose feet meekly strides his white man's burden: an American Indian in full warrior headdress.

There was a time in the 1960s when there appeared to be a danger that overweening enthusiasm for art as castor oil for the ills of the urban environment might make a mismatch of both. In those days, buses would ply the outer boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, laden with models for works by contemporary sculptors, and the populace was invited to vote on them. Usually that hapless public was not so subtly induced by the well-meaning doyennes of the bus to vote on the sculpture that would seem most ethnically appropriate - a Puerto Rican artist for El Barrio, for instance. Times have changed, now ethnic groups would vote that way without the least prodding.

The worst thing that happened in the 1960s and 1970s, however, was that a handful of what might be called professional public sculptors were invited to deposit their signature styles on building plazas like so many cows in a meadow. Clement Meadmore was one of the most egregious and easily forgotten of this species.

Out of the civic and artistic pride of the decades that followed did come some extraordinary works such as the red, white, and blue Jean Dubuffet creatures in the plaza at the foot of the Chase Manhattan Bank in the Wall Street area. But usually it was a single individual and an individual passion that was responsible for so apt a choice - in the case of Jean Dubuffet it was David Rockefeller.

From time to time a public sculpture would be adopted by the neighborhood, which is the case of Tony Smith's cube at Cooper Union college at Astor Place in Greenwich Village. Like an adult version of the Alice in Wonderland, the cube has become a place to clamber over, to lean on for a smoke, to tryst at.

What has happened in the past two decades is that a number of public and private organizations interested in integrating art and the urban environment have taken their lessons from the disappointments of permanent public sculptures by professional public sculptors, as well as from the pleasures of interactivity.

The Public Art Fund is a non-profit visual arts organization that commissions and presents temporary exhibitions throughout New York City. The same can be said of Creative Time. The difference is in the ambitions of the projects. The Public Art Fund seems to be better at getting funding. Under its relatively new executive director Tom Eccles, who is imported from Britain, it is also more interested in the big impact statement.

Creative Time is a rather more funky organization, which does its best work just at the moment when the wrecking balls are approaching an old neighborhood or an old building (at least old by New York standards) and before the real estate developers go into action.

These two organizations treat public art as a kind of guerilla action. You parachute in with your art, let it do its work of confrontation, enticement, enchantment, pedagogy. Sometimes the art invites the neighborhood to interact, and at its very best it alters viewers' perceptions. It

illuminates the meaning of the site it inhabits, or of the lives of the passersby who encounter it. Public art in this sense becomes an active verb.

There are very good reasons why at this moment in history public art in New York works best as either temporary or interactive art. And they have to do with the usual reasons of commerce. They have to do with the fact that the life of a new building has been shortened immeasurably in recent years, because developers no longer sell a building when it is completed; they lease it out. The goal becomes to realize a profit in the shortest possible time, tear the thing up, like so much used Kleenex, and begin again.

So any marriage between real estate and art which pretends to be permanent is merely kidding itself. Very often such arrangements are disasters from the very start. This was certainly the case with "Metronome," a complex and monumental work that the artistic team Kristin Jones and Andre Ginzel created for 1 Union Square South and the developer The Related Companies LP. I can't show you a slide, because generous as Public Art Fund was with its slides, it took care not to provide me with this one.

The trouble was that the developers had in mind to build a particularly cut rate and therefore hideous building in a particularly key position to the redevelopment of the blighted shopping neighborhood around Union Square on 14th Street. The face of the building consists of a 98-foot by 50-foot wide wall, which the artists proceeded to fill by overcompensating for its emptiness. They filled it with: a 67-foot bronze cone at the center of which is a void belching steam, an atomic clock that busily counts off megaseconds gone and megaseconds yet to come each day, a

rock, a giant hand mirroring George Washington's hand on an equestrian statue across the street, and a sphere that rotates in sync with the phases of the moon. They did it grandiose, they had to do it on the cheap, and the effect is overwrought and oddly static.

Give those same artists the chance to work small and ephemeral, however, and they create fully imagined narratives of memory, loss, and inconvenient desire.(3 slides) In July of 1993, Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel created "Mimesis" in an abandoned movie theater on 42nd Street in Times Square. The theater had ended its life elbowed on each side by sex shops, frequented by dope peddlers, and host to the kind of movies that draw men in raincoats in the middle of the day. One was drawn to the theater by a sound, a heartbeat. It came from the admission booth, There was no one inside, only a trail of shoes leading toward the doors which were locked. It was impossible not to pear into those doors, which were locked. Beyond them, rows of costumes hung between corridors of mirrors receding into a distant fantasy of fantasy escapes into sex and drugs, which were never, of course escapes at all.

In fact, the public installation for which Ginzel and Jones created "Mimesis," was one of the most successful art intervention in my memory in New York. Creative Time took advantage of one of those moments when real estate interests were at rest, while negotiations proceeded to the next stage, and there was space for something untoward to happen. For decades city planners have wanted to do something about Times Square and 42nd Street, which is the heart of Manhattan, but has always been a dirty secret, tawdry sort of heart. The conventional wisdom was that nothing ever could be done about Times Square because it lay between Grand Central Station and Penn Station, perfectly placed for suburban commuters in search of X-rated

pleasures.

But in 1993, the 42nd Street Development Authority began assembling the sex shops and sex theaters and emptying them out, in preparation for demolition. Commuters still strode the street, hapless tourists still made their way there, and something had to be done about the ugly empty buildings. Creative Time invited artists interested in arresting pedestrians long enough to surprise them.

Jenny Holzer put her Truisms on Theater Marquees. (2 slides). Liz Diller + Ric Scofidio (slide) made "Soft Sell," a fake peep show in another abandoned theater. They projected an image of enormous succulent lips onto the theater doors, and from those came siren words of seduction that drew you to the doors, which seemed to offer titillating pleasures beyond, until the image changed and the doors turned opaque, in a nightmare of seduction and frustration that Sartre would have recognized.

Since then 42nd Street has been developed after all. It is Disney and Virgin Records which offer their siren songs. The seductions now are commercial and corporate.

My other very favorite Creative Time intervention was "On the Beach," in 1985, at a moment when the land on which the Battery Park Housing Development has since risen, across the highway from the World Trade Towers, was still only landfill. Where the marble precincts of the World Financial Center now stand, David Hammons constructed a shack, so precise and so evocative in its humanity, that no one could escape its socio-economic message or its poetry. (4

slides).

The Public Art Fund has had a particularly visible summer this year, with Jeff Koon's topiary puppy residing in Rockefeller Center at the spot usually occupied by the annual enormous Christmas tree; Ilya Kabakov's "Palace of Projects" in an Armory downtown, and a video installation by Pipilotti Rist at 1 Times Square. But by far its most successful expression of urban realities and urban beauties was the one which the British artist Rachel Whiteread provided in 1998.

On the metal base where once a wooden water tower had stood on the roof of a building in Soho, she placed a resin cast she had made of the interior of a water tower. Such towers still store water for some old buildings. They populate the skyline with reminders of an industrial society now past, like telephone poles on rural roads. Generally people do not notice these quite beautiful additions to the daytime sky. One has to look up to do so, to pause in one's New York hurry. Whiteread's resin reflected sunshine, became transparent at dusk, disappeared in certain light. It was modest but urgent, it demanded that attention should be payed to the place in which one lived. The Watertower is no longer a public sculpture. It has been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art and will be installed in the museum's new building when it opens.

Like a good guest, it did not linger too long where it had been placed. It did not get in the way. It enhanced experience.

The impermanence of guerrilla sculpture suits New York in the year 2000. Museums are

institutions charged with the preservation of material culture. The streets are theaters of change, experience and information.