

1979

Issues & Commentary

Public Sculpture for the Post-Heroic Age

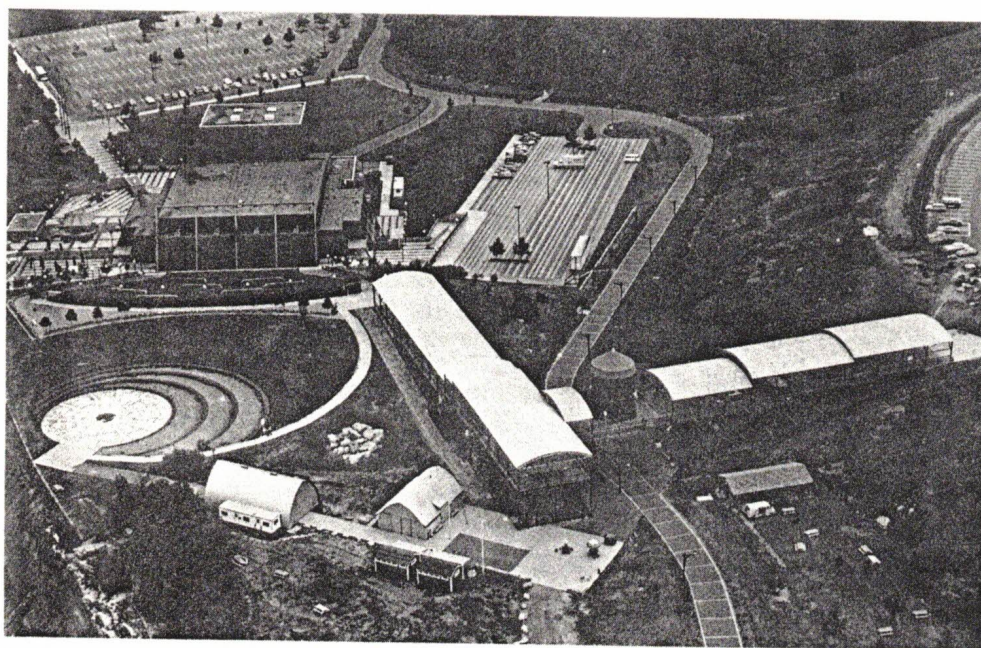
By commissioning impermanent works created on the spot, Artpark has helped to define a new concept of public art: site-specific sculpture designed for leisure-time consumption.

BY LAWRENCE ALLOWAY

Public sculpture is usually associated with memorial functions, commemorating public personages whose services to society we have forgotten and wars in which none of the population has fought. Even statues that were modern at the time of their unveiling—men depicted in frock coats rather than togas—have dated. At Artpark we see sculpture for the public that is separated from any commemorative function. In 1976 the executive director described the project as “a prototype for public art.” The question that arises is: What is the content of work that is shown publicly, that is to say, outside galleries and museums, but is not committed to public themes? A possible point of reference is the jungle gym, in which physical participation takes the place of iconographical comprehension. For instance, George Trakas in 1976 constructed a long, narrow gangway at Artpark which routed the spectator through picturesque terrain. Some of the artists working there have evoked participation at the level of process, as when, in 1975, Michelle Stuart used local helpers to pound surrounding soil into a great length of paper in the park.

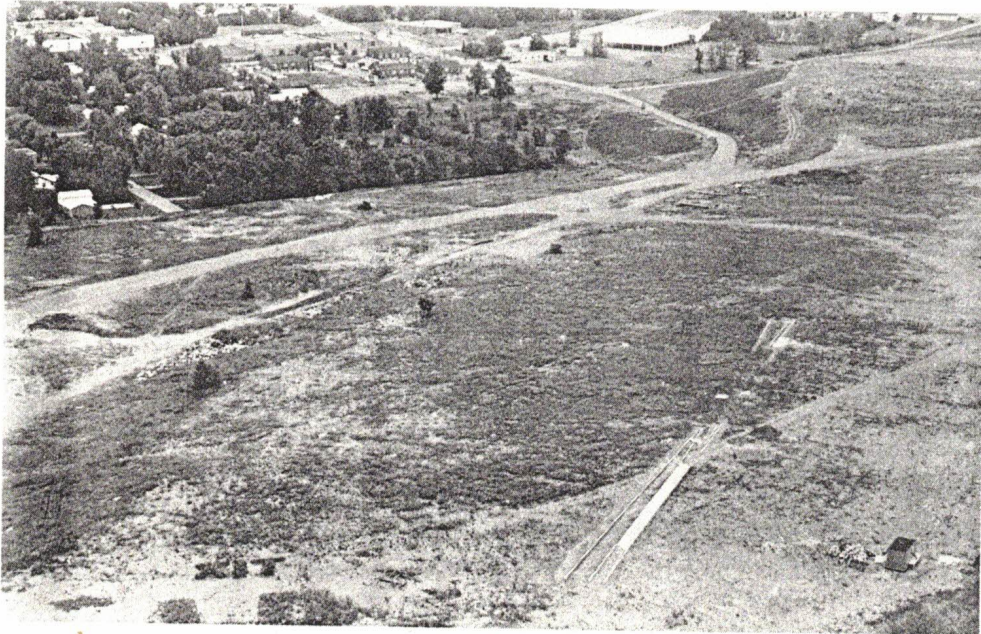
Thus the situation at Artpark leads to the practice of public sculpture as occasion rather than as monument. The trouble with public sculpture as a rule is that it outlasts its legibility. Artpark has always stressed the impermanence of the work there, which of course sharpens the sense of occasion; the works revert to the artist if they are movable, or are destroyed if they are site-bound. Most of the works are created on the spot, giving the art public access to work-in-progress and to the artists.

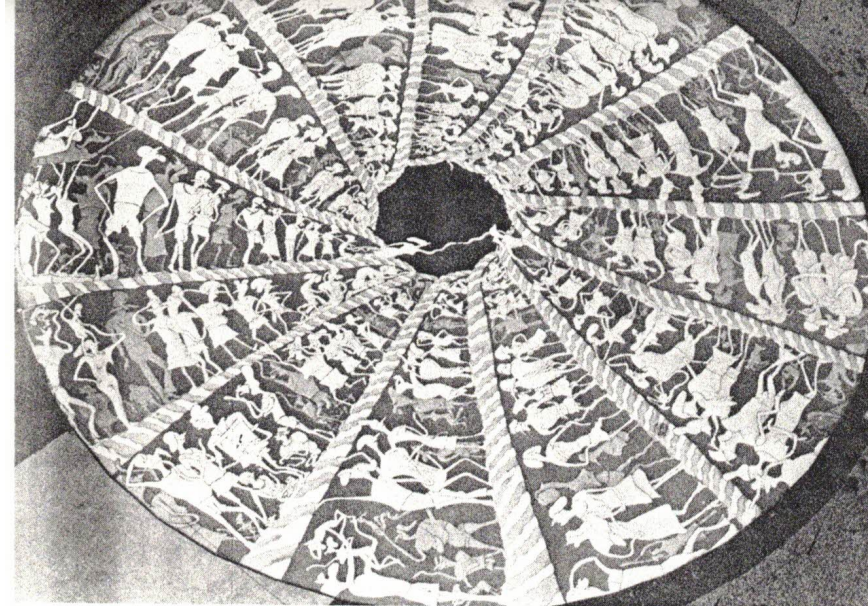
This transformation of public sculpture in the direction of expendability and work-as-spectacle can be linked to another recent development. It has not been unusual in the '70s to begin the discussion of sculpture with a view of the site. This is true of work in a variety of styles: earthworks in Nevada, Carl Andre in Hartford, Robert Morris in Grand Rapids, and outdoor sculpture on the grounds of the Manhattan Psychiatric Center on Ward's Island. It is no less necessary to take the topography of Artpark into account. It is located outside Lewiston, N.Y. near Buffalo, on the Niagara River with the Falls not far off. Artpark is a 200-acre state park reclaimed from garbage, chemical and construction dumps—though one bare patch of the park is still called the Spoils Pile. Canada is on the other side of the steep, richly wooded gorge. In the last five summers this has been a center for third



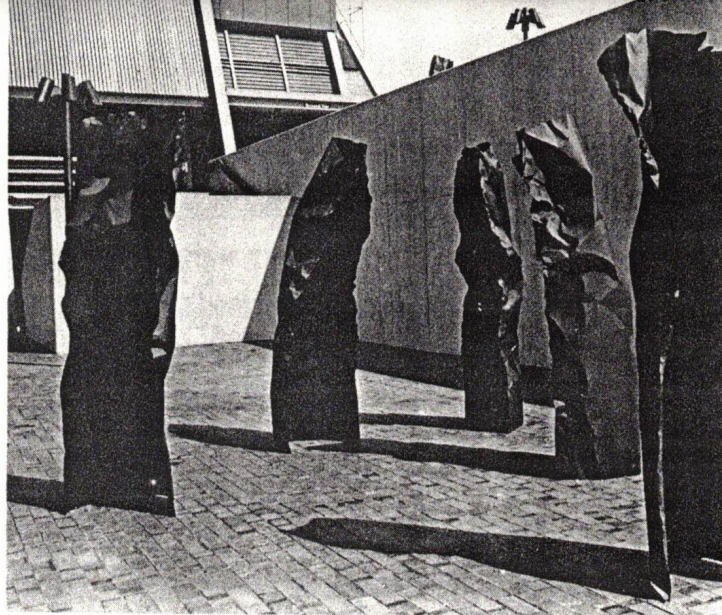
Aerial view of Artpark, Lewiston, New York, 1979, with Gladys Nilsson's circular painting on the amphitheater floor (left) and Gene Davis' painted car lot (upper right).

Barry Le Va's unfinished installation of concrete elements, 400 feet long.





Gladys Nilsson's untitled painting on the amphitheater floor, 75 feet in diameter.



Rosemarie Castoro: *Flashers*, painted sheet metal.

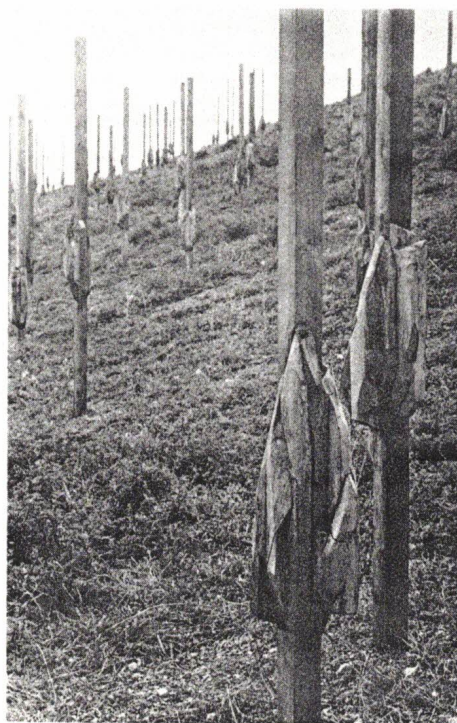
stage earthworks.

Robert Smithson's *Sites/Non-Sites* and *Mirror Displacements* of 1968–69 are crucial to the exploratory first stage of earthworks; in them, speculation about the world and signs of the world were developed. In the *Sites/Non-Sites*, for example, he established complex relationships between the absent but real site and the accessible but artificial signs of the site shown in the gallery. The next stage, from the late '60s well into the '70s, saw the full-scale realization of large earthworks, embedded heroically in remote landscapes, by Michael Heizer, Walter de Maria and Smithson. In the third stage, site-specific work is linked to the sphere of play and leisure, as at Artpark. The earthwork is socialized in this setting. Nancy Holt, Dennis Oppenheim, Alan Sonfist, Mary Miss and Alice Aycock have all done earthworks or site-specific works at Artpark. (Incidentally, the first Artpark exhibition was dedicated to Smithson's memory.)

To see second-stage earthworks, you have to buy an airline ticket and then get hold of a jeep. To see the new works you pack a picnic basket on the weekend. Apart from easy access, there is another characteristic feature of later site-specific sculpture: it tends to be intricate and intimate, subtle rather than commanding—post-heroic, shall we say. The big works of the second stage were privately supported at the initiative of the artists, whereas Artpark and the works in it are funded by the state, as part of an enlightened program to enhance people's leisure.

Artpark's facilities include a theater and a kind of dry-land pier with studios, offices and decks that ease in steps down the hill toward the bluff above the Niagara River. The theater accommodates traditional plays, and in the studios there are workshops that range from glass painting to French cooking to cutting untailored clothing. No doubt far fewer visitors would see Artpark's sculpture if it were not for these

To see the early earthworks, you had to buy an airline ticket and then get hold of a jeep. The new, socialized earthworks—such as those at Artpark—are intricate, intimate and subtle. They are also easy to reach. To see them, you pack a picnic basket on the weekend.



Ursula Von Rydingsvaard: installation of carved cedar modules in a 2,000-square-foot field.

other attractions. It is clear that only the visual arts program is conceived innovatively; the rest stays within cheerful, modest limits.

There are fewer artists at Artpark than usual this year, but an effort was made to maximize the impact of their work. The trouble with process art as public sculpture is that there may not be much to see at any one time. Some past Artpark sculptures were seen better when published retrospectively in lavish catalogues than on the spot. To ensure something for visitors to see besides the toiling figure of the artist, two painters were included among the invited artists for the first time this season. Painters can usually conclude their work faster than sculptors and, in fact, Gladys Nilsson and Gene Davis completed large works early in the summer. Ursula Von Rydingsvaard completed a large sculpture, but Barry Le Va's ground-hugger was still unfinished in early August. (He set aside the residency expectation of Artpark, intended to give the public contact with the artists, though a devoted assistant lived in a hobo shack on the site and kept working.)

On the boundary between the park and the town of Lewiston, Von Rydingsvaard sited a multi-unit sculpture, which could be seen from the side as you entered the park. It faced outwards, though, and needed to be viewed from the road outside the park to appreciate its scale and consistency. Two thousand square feet of hillside were occupied by more than 100 tall, closely grouped cedar posts, each bearing an irregular extrusion of the same material, formed by layers of sawn wood attached together. The profusion of similar elements suggested a massing of agave (the tall cactus of Arizona). Thus an interplay of organic image and machine-made regularity of form was inventively maintained in whole and part.

Von Rydingsvaard's piece was landscape-oriented in a way that Rosemarie Castoro's *Flashers*, a group of sheet-metal

standing pieces, were not. Both groups can be used again at other sites, but Castoro's is keyed to an architectural setting. Her pieces occupied terraces and landings of the theater at different levels. They were like carapaces or, as the title informs us, opened overcoats—but with no man inside. They invited step-in participation, and despite the ominous beetle-black they were painted, they were continually occupied.

Artpark's pier-like structure commands a view of the park. To the left as you descended you could see the hillside Von Rydingsvaard intended to use originally, but could not as it turned out to be contaminated by waste chemicals. To the right was the parking lot that Clarence Wood painted according to Gene Davis' instructions, with 60 two-foot-wide stripes of candy color. It looked like a swingle's bedsheet, on which he had left his toy car collection. (I want to thank David Katzive for his serpentine driving in the lot itself, against the Brunelleschian imperative of converging perspective lines.) Between the pier and the river is an amphitheater, a shallow circle originally intended for historical pageants. Gladys Nilsson is known for her watercolors; like the Chicago-based Hairy Who artists with whom she is associated, her work is normally small, but here she expanded to monumental scale with complete success. She took over the 75-foot-diameter floor trium-

phantly, occupying the giant round surface with a subtle range of pinks, tans, and blues without sacrificing her usual subtlety. As is appropriate for a circular painting on the ground, it is like a flattened dome in composition—a kind of sandwiched cupola with, instead of a radiant central opening, a dark hole. The painting is divided into 12 sections, like a pie-clock, each with its own procession of small writhing human figures. The artist declines to discuss iconography, but admits to the presence of some Artpark visitors in the painting. At that, her lively cast is perhaps more human and less amoebic here than it used to be.

Artpark's importance has been to demonstrate the basis of a new concept of public art, one in which the sense of occasion—the act of visiting the site—becomes the basis of artistic contact. Given the lack of any agreed-on iconography linking artists and the undifferentiated public, this is an achievement rich in implications. Parks rather than city centers may be the proper location for today's public art. And by concentrating its patronage on temporary works of art, Artpark stays clean and renewable. Flexibility becomes possible in the context of leisure rather than commemoration.

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The Todi Festival: Public Sculpture Umbrian Style

Artconference-Umbria got off to a lively start with an exhibition and a series of lectures and films on the theme of monumental sculpture.

BY FRED S. LIGHT

With the July '79 debut of the Todi festival, more accurately known as "Artconference-Umbria," the Spoleto festival has acquired a worthy—and, by all indications, enduring—counterpart in the visual arts. If all goes as planned, a shuttle bus will eventually formalize the liaison, allowing participants of either festival to join in events at the other town. But even by itself, the first edition of the festival at Todi, organized by Diane Kelder, was a clear success, and next year's theme of "The Ideal City" seems well chosen to expand upon that base.

The town of Todi has itself long been famous among cognoscenti for its superb piazza, and for the church of Santa Maria

della Consolazione, a landmark of High Renaissance architecture. The festival, whose theme this year was "Monumental Sculpture, Past and Present," made the most of this historical backdrop with a three-part exhibition that set the tone for the scheduled lectures, films and discussions. In the vast town hall a thoughtfully hung photographic exhibition examined the history, function and significance of monumental sculpture in Western culture. Next door, Beverly Pepper, who lives near Todi, showed past and present work in maquettes and photographs, while out in the piazza her five columnar sculptures gave a new rhythmic development to the medieval square.

The townspeople were naturally a little

put off by the disruptions and annoyances the festival brought with it. Within a few days, though, after an open discussion in the headquarters of one of the majority political parties, the uneasy truce between foreigners and townspeople turned into a much more cordial conviviality. The Todini's most serious objection, that they were strangers at their own festival because of the polyglot nature of the discussions and lectures, inspired an impromptu translator to valiant efforts. Next year will see the inauguration of proper simultaneous translation service.

The program ranged far and wide in theme as well as method, from Sheldon Nodelman's strict archeological deductions regarding late Roman sculptural styles to Marcelin Pleynet's lyrical-intuitive interpretations of Rodin's *Balzac*. Problems of restoration were broached by Giulio Carlo Argan, the mayor of Rome and renowned art historian, while Wolfgang Lotz explored the relationship between public space and public sculpture. A more philological approach was entertained in Marisa Volpi-Orlandini's paper, while the political considerations of sculptural styles predominated in Mario Torelli's rebuttal to Nodelman. Similarly political in bent, Eugenio Battisti insightfully examined modern corporation uses of monumental sculpture.

Virginia Bush, meanwhile, presented much new work on Bandinelli's heroic *Heracles and Cacus*, delineating along the way the underlying interaction among artist, society and politico-economic circumstances in the 16th century. This theme was amplified by Kathleen Weil-Garris, who concentrated on Bandinelli's fine balance between private aspirations and public demands in his monuments.

Artists Gio Pomodoro, Nino Caruso, Richard Lippold and Beverly Pepper all contributed productively to discussions, seeming to have more of a knack than their academic colleagues for involving the lay audience. The sessions revolving about films were among the liveliest because each film was itself as much a topic of discussion as its subject matter—Barbara Rose's film on di Suvero, for example, Rainer Crone's on Heizer, and others. Pomodoro's filming of his own *Monument to Gramsci* extended the arguments related to politics, propaganda and working methods from the subject of the film to the film itself.

Perhaps the strongest shared sense at the festival was of having passed a turning point in the relationship between sculptor and critic, sculptor and public, critic and public. From the statements made by Rosalind Krauss, Diane Kelder, Barbara Rose and most of the other participants, it would seem that sculpture has regained its proper place as a function of public expression and public values. Now that stylistic battles have been fought and won, now that the modern sculptor is assured of the understanding and support that has been more easily available to painters, it is once