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One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity
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*Sitings of Public Art:
Integration versus Intervention*

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View of South Bronx Sculpture Park site at Jerome and Gerard avenues and 169th Street (44th Precinct Police Station), c 1992. (Photo by Nancy Owens)

At the juncture of Jerome and Gerard avenues and 169th Street in the South Bronx, across from the 44th Police Precinct building on one side and facing the elevated subway tracks cutting through the sky on another, is a small piece of no-man's land. If not for the conspicuous row of three large concrete cubes flanking one perimeter, this traffic triangle might remain indistinguishable from other slivers of similarly odd-shaped, leftover urban spaces found throughout the city. The cubic plinths are, in fact, the pedestals for three public sculptures by John Ahearn, sponsored by the Percent for Art program of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. Originally designed to serve as the bases for life-size bronze casts of Raymond Garcia (and his pit bull, Toby), Corey Mann, and Daleesha—all Ahearn's neighbors around Walton Avenue in the Bronx from the mid to late 1980s—the pedestals have remained empty except for the accumula-

tion of trash and graffiti, for about ten years. Since September 25, 1991, to be precise, when the artist himself had the sculptures removed only five days after their installation in response to protests by some residents and city officials who deemed them inappropriate for the site.¹

In downtown Manhattan, at the juncture of Lafayette and Centre streets as they converge to become Nassau Street, there is another more or less triangular plot of public land, officially known as Foley Square. Framed by several formidable government buildings—United States Customs Court, Federal Office Building, New York County Court House, and United States Court House—the eastern perimeter of Foley Square faces Federal Plaza. This expansive plaza is populated with a set of large green mounds, perfect half-spheres that look like grass covered igloos. Wrapping around the mounds is a series of serpentine benches, reiterating the circular form of the mounds and painted a bright apple green. Designed by well-known landscape architect Martha Schwartz, Federal Plaza today is a playful and decorative mix of street furniture and natural materials, a clever reworking of traditional design elements of urban parks. Seen from above, the plaza is an abstract composition in green, with yards of seating rippling through the space like highly contrived ribbons.



Martha Schwartz, Federal Plaza, New York, 1997-1998.

¹ According to Ahearn (verified through the Alexander and Bonin Gallery New York May 2000), he has a “gentleman’s agreement” with the city of New York that some day when the funds become available through the sale of the original three sculptures he will be given the opportunity to complete the project. How this completion will be pursued remains unclear. The original design of the traffic triangle was in collaboration with Nancy Owens, a landscape architect with the city’s Parks Department.

As many will recall, this last site, Federal Plaza, full of dynamic colors and user-friendly forms today was once the site of a rancorous and vehement controversy concerning Richard Serra's steel sculpture *Tilted Arc*. Commissioned by the U.S. General Services Administration in 1979 and installed in 1981, the 12-foot-high, 120-foot-long sculpture was removed on March 15, 1989, after five years of public hearings, lawsuits, and plenty of media coverage concerning the legality and appropriateness of such an action. Now, a little over ten years later, the site has experienced a complete makeover. Martha Schwartz's redesign of Federal Plaza has erased all physical and historical traces of *Tilted Arc*.

So I begin here, with two "empty" sites of two "failed" public art works. The forlorn vacancy of the traffic triangle in the South Bronx and the specious pleasantness of Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan bracket this chapter's consideration of the problematics of site specificity in the mainstream public art context.² One point to stress at the outset is the fact that even though site-specific modes of artistic practice emerged in the mid to late 1950s—roughly coinciding with the inception of the Art-in-Architecture Program of the General Services Administration (GSA) in 1963, the Art-in-Public-Places Program of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1967, and numerous local and state Percent for Art programs throughout the 1960s—it was not until 1974 that concern to promote site specific approaches to public art was first registered within the guidelines of these organizations, in particular the NEA. This lag is an initial indication that while the term "site specificity" might move fluidly through various cultures of artistic practice today—museums, galleries, alternative spaces, international biennials, public art programs—the history and implications of the term can be profoundly inconsistent from context to context. Thus, one task of this chapter is to chart the particular trajectory of site specificity within public art as a point of clarification. In particular, I will argue, the changing conceptualization of site specificity in the public art context indexes the changing criteria by which an art work's public relevance and its democratic sociopolitical ambitions have been imagined over the past three decades. Our story will concentrate on Ahearn's and Serra's cases to contemplate the meaningfulness of their respective "empty" sites, especially as they signal the limits and capacity of site specificity today.

² All art is engaged in public discourse in one way or another; by "mainstream public art" I mean the specific category of art that is typically sponsored and/or administered by city state, or national government agencies, in whole or in part. It involves bureaucratized review and approval procedures that are outside the museum or gallery system and often engage numerous nonart organizations, including local community groups, private foundations and corporations. However, this chapter's limited working definition of the term is provisional, insofar as the meaning of the "public" in public art continues to be open to debate.



Alexander Calder, *La Grande Vitesse*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1961. (Photo courtesy of Grand Rapids City Hall.)

Three distinct paradigms can be identified within the roughly 35-year history of the modern public art movement in the United States.³ First, there is the art-in-public-places model exemplified by Alexander Calder's *La Grande Vitesse* in Grand Rapids, Michigan (1967), the first commission to be completed through the Art-in-Public-Places Program of the NEA. The second paradigm is the art-as-public-spaces approach, typified by design-oriented urban sculptures of Scott Burton, Siah Armajani, Mary Miss, Nancy Holt, and others, which function as street furniture, architectural constructions, or landscaped environments. Finally there is the art in-the-public interest model, named as such by critic Arlene Raven and most cogently theorized by artist Suzanne Lacy under the heading of

³ For background information on public art in the United States since the early 1960s, see John Beardsley, *Art in Public Places. A Survey of Community Sponsored Projects Supported by the NEA* (Washington, D.C.: Partners for Livable Places, 1981); Donald Thalacker, *The Place of Art in the World of Architecture* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1980); and Harriet Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture: Tradition, Transformation, and Controversy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

“new genre public art.”⁴ Select projects by artists such as John Malpede, Daniel Martinez, Hope Sandrow, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Tim Rollins and K.O.S., and Peggy Diggs, among many others, are distinguished for foregrounding social issues and political activism, and/or for engaging “community” collaborations.⁵

Initially, from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s, public art was dominated by the art-in-public-places paradigm—modernist abstract sculptures that were often enlarged replicas of works normally found in museums and galleries.⁶ These art works were usually signature pieces from internationally established male artists (favored artists who received the most prominent commissions during this period include Isamu Noguchi, Henry Moore, and Alexander Calder). In



Isamu Noguchi, *Red Cube*, Marine Midland Bank Plaza (now HSBC) at Broadway and Liberty Street, New York, 1968.

⁴ See Arlene Raven, ed., *Art in the Public Interest* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989); and Suzanne Lacy ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

⁵ The paradigm shifts I note here are further elaborated in my essay “For Hamburg: Public Art and Urban Identities,” in *Kunst auf Schritt und Tritt (Public Art Is Everywhere)* (Hamburg, Germany: Kellner, 1997), 95-107.

⁶ In the mid-1970s, the phrase “art in public places” was used by some public art professionals to distinguish location conscious art from “public art,” sculptures that were simply placed in public spaces, like Calder’s. Thus my use of “art in public places” to designate the latter may be confusing to some, but since the NEA used the phrase as the title of its own program to promote this type of art, I am adopting it here.

and of themselves, they had no distinctive qualities to render them “public” except perhaps their size and scale.⁷ What legitimated them as “public” art was quite simply their siting outdoors or in locations deemed to be public primarily because of their “openness” and unrestricted physical access—parks, university campuses, civic centers, entrance areas to federal buildings, plazas off city streets, parking lots, airports.

In the early 1970s, Henry Moore spoke of his relative indifference to the site, a position that is representative of many (though not all) artists working in the art-in public-places mode: “I don’t like doing commissions in the sense that I go and look at a site and then think of something. Once I have been asked to consider a certain place where one of my sculptures might possibly be placed, I try to choose something suitable from what I’ve done or from what I’m about to do. But I don’t sit down and try to create something especially for it.”⁸ Whether they were voluptuous abstractions of the human body in bronze or marble, colorful agglomerations of biomorphic shapes in steel, or fanciful plays on geometric forms in concrete, modernist public sculptures were conceived as autonomous works of art whose relationship to the site was at best incidental. Furthermore, just as the conditions of the site were considered irrelevant in the conception and production of a sculpture (because they functioned as distractions more than inspirations), so they needed to be suppressed at the point of reception if the sculpture was to speak forcefully to its viewers. Again in Moore’s words: “To display sculpture to its best advantage outdoors, it must be set so that it relates to the sky rather than to trees, a house, people, or other aspects of its surroundings. Only the sky miles away allows us to contrast infinity with reality and so we are able to discover the sculptor’s inner scale without comparison.”⁹

Thus the central issue preoccupying the artists of such public commissions (as well as their patrons or sponsors) was the proper placement of the discrete art work so as to best enhance and showcase its aesthetic qualities. The particular qualities of the site—in this case we are speaking primarily of the site as a physical, architectural entity—mattered only to the extent that they posed formal compositional challenges. For the architects involved, the art work was usually considered a beneficial visual supplement but finally an extraneous element to the integrity of a building or space. Contrarily in many artists’ views, the site remained a ground or pedestal upon which, or against which, the priority of the figure of the art work would be articulated. Such thinking was predicated on a

⁷ Interestingly for Robert Morris the size and scale of a sculpture was directly proportional to its publicness: the smaller the work, the greater the demand for intimacy of perception (private); the larger the work, the greater the demand for a “public” interaction. See his “Notes on Sculpture,” in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 222-228.

⁸ Henry Moore, as quoted in Henry J. Seldis, *Henry Moore in America* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 176-177.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

strict separation between art and architecture (synonymous with the site) as two autonomous fields of practice, and it promoted complimentary visual contrast as the defining (formal) relationship between the two.

By bringing the “best” in contemporary art to a wider audience, by siting examples of it in public places, endeavors like the Art-in-Architecture Program of the GSA, the Art-in-Public-Places Program of the NEA, and the Percent for Art programs at local and state levels hoped to promote the aesthetic edification of the American public and to beautify the urban environment.¹⁰ Public art works were meant to play a supplementary but crucial role in the amelioration of what were perceived to be the ill effects of the repetitive, monotonous, and functionalist style of modernist architecture. (The inclusion of artists within architectural design teams for the development of urban spaces in the art-as-public-spaces mode of practice, our second paradigm, continued to be predicated on the belief that with the artist’s humanizing influence, the sense of alienation and disaffection engendered by the inhuman urban landscape of modernism could be rectified.¹¹ Which is to say public art at this point was conceived as an antidote to modernist architecture and urban design.) With such expectations at play the art-in-public-places phenomenon had spread widely across the United States by the late 1970s.¹² Art historian Sam Hunter described the omnipresence of monumental abstract public sculptures in cities across the country around this time:

¹⁰ There is an important distinction to be drawn between the GSA and the NEA: the former administers federally sponsored commissions; the latter administers “community”-initiated projects. Starting in 1963, the GSA mandated that 0.5 to 1 percent of the estimated construction costs of all new federal buildings be set aside for art. Local Percent for Art programs, which follow the GSA model, were first instituted in cities like Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Seattle in the early to mid 1960s. The NEA program, by contrast, was set up to respond to local initiatives (from ad hoc citizens’ groups and not-for-profit institutions or organizations, like arts commissions). Once it accepts a proposal, the NEA offers a matching grant and, through a small committee of art experts, helps administer the process of selecting a site, choosing and negotiating with an artist, arranging for transportation and installation of the work, and mounting educational efforts to introduce the artist’s work to the local community. In many instances, those at the NEA advise on GSA commissions. See Beardsley, *Art in Public Places*, for more details.

¹¹ The Livable Cities Program initiated by the NEA in 1977 as part of its architecture program, for example, explicitly sought to find “creativity and imagination—to get it from the artist and apply it to the problems of the built environment” so as to “give promise of economic and social benefit to the community.” See Louis G. Redstone, with Ruth R. Redstone, *Public Art: New Directions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), vi.

¹² In the eyes of the urban elite and city managers during the 1970s and 1980s, public art was also supposed to attract tourism, new businesses and work forces, and residential development, and was expected to boost a city’s sense of identity. Public art initiatives since the 1960s, in fact, have always been tied to urban renewal and economic revitalization efforts. On these issues, see Kate Linker, “Public Sculpture: The Pursuit of the Pleasurable and Profitable Paradise,” *Artforum* (March 1981): 64-73, and “Public Sculpture II: Provisions for the Paradise,” *Artforum* (Summer 1981): 37-42. See also Sharon Zukin, *The Culture of Cities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995); Erika Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Com-*

In the seventies the triumph of the new public art was firmly secured. Almost any new corporate or municipal plaza worthy of its name deployed an obligatory large-scale sculpture, usually in a severely geometric, Minimalist style; or where more conservative tastes prevailed and funds were more generous, one might find instead a recumbent figure in bronze by Henry Moore or one of Jacques Lipchitz's mythological creatures. Today there is scarcely an American city of significant size boasting an urban-renewal program that lacks one or more large, readily identifiable modern sculptures to relieve the familiar stark vistas of concrete, steel, and glass.¹³

Despite the initial enthusiasm, as early as the mid 1970s the art-in-public-places approach began to be criticized for having very little to offer in the way of either aesthetic edification or urban beautification. Many critics and artists argued that autonomous signature-style art works sited in public places functioned more like extensions of the museum, advertising individual artists and their accomplishments (and by extension their patrons' status) rather than making any genuine gestures toward public engagement.¹⁴ It was further argued that despite the physical accessibility, public art remained resolutely inaccessible insofar as the prevalent style of modernist abstraction remained indecipherable, uninteresting, and meaningless to a general audience. The art work's seeming indifference to the particular conditions of the site and/or its proximate audience was reciprocated by the public's indifference, even hostility toward the foreignness of abstract art's visual language and toward its aloof and haughty physical presence in public places. Instead of a welcome reprieve in the flow of everyday urban life, public art seemed to be an unwanted imposition completely disengaged from it. Many critics, artists, and sponsors agreed that, at best, public art was a pleasant visual contrast to the rationalized regularity of its surroundings, providing a nice decorative effect. At worst, it was an empty trophy commemorating the powers and riches of the dominant class—a corporate bauble or architectural jewelry. And as the increasing private corporate sponsorship of public art became

munities (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), especially chapter three, "Public Art in the Corporate Sphere", and my essay "For Hamburg: Public Art and Urban Identities."

¹³ Sam Hunter, "The Public Agency as Patron," in *Art for the Public: The Collection of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey* (New York: Port Authority of New York and New Jersey 1985), 35.

¹⁴ In addition to Kate Linker's criticism, see also Lawrence Alloway "The Public Sculpture Problem," *Studio International* 184 (October 1972): 123-124; and Alloway "Problems of Iconography and Style," in *Urban Encounters: Art Architecture Audience*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1980), 15-20.

associated with the expansion of corporate real estate developments, pressures increased to rehabilitate the art-in-public-places programs.¹⁵

One of the key solutions to these interconnected problems of public art's public relations and its ineffectual influence on the urban environment was the adoption of site-specific principles for public art. Indeed, it was in reaction to the glut of ornamental "plop art"¹⁶ and the monumental "object-off-the-pedestal" paradigm that, for instance, the NEA changed its guidelines in 1974 to stipulate, even if somewhat, vaguely that public art works needed to be "appropriate to the immediate site."¹⁷ Whereas the program's initial 1965 goals had been to support individual artists of exceptional talent and demonstrated ability and to provide the public with opportunities to experience the best of American contemporary art, new mandates at all levels of public art sponsorship and funding now stipulated that the specificities of the site should influence, if not determine, the final artistic outcome.¹⁸ Thus, despite the numerous pragmatic and bureaucratic difficulties in commissioning new art works (certainly it is simpler to purchase existing ones), the support for site-specific approaches to public art, favoring the creation of unique and unrepeatably aesthetic responses tailored to specific locations within a city became fairly quickly institutionalized.¹⁹ In the minds of those intimately engaged with the public art industry at the time, including artists, administrators, and critics, establishing a direct formal link between the material configuration of the art work and the existing physical conditions of the site—instead of emphasizing their disconnection or autonomy—seemed like a very good idea. Such an approach was advocated as an important step toward making art works

¹⁵ According to Kate Linker, in the 1960s a large portion of funding for public art was provided by the private sector. Corporations sponsored art to adorn office buildings, shopping malls, banks, etc., creating a new kind of "public" space (privately owned, publicly accessible) that became available to art. A traditional nationalist ideology of older forms of public art was replaced by a business ideology, and modern, abstract, often large-scale sculptures predominated as a favored style. See Linker, "Public Sculpture."

¹⁶ The term is commonly attributed to architect James Wines of SITE. He is also known to have coined the phrase "turds on the plaza" to describe the ubiquitous abstract modernist sculptures on urban plazas.

¹⁷ Statement taken from the official Art-in-Public-Places grant application guidelines of the Visual Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts as cited by Mary Jane Jacob in her essay "Outside the Loop," in *Culture in Action*, exh. cat. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 54.

¹⁸ A brief history of this transition is recounted in Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain*, 21-24. See also Richard Andrews, "Artists and the Visual Definition of Cities: The Experience of Seattle," in Stacy Paleologos Harris, ed., *Insights/On Sites: Perspectives on Art in Public Places* (Washington, D.C.: Partners for Livable Places, 1984), 16-23.

¹⁹ According to Richard Andrews, who headed Seattle's Percent for Art program during the 1970s, public art, from an arts agency point of view, can be divided into two distinct types: those works aligned with the tradition of *collecting*, which are object oriented and site transferable; and those that fall within the tradition of *building*, which are involved in the designing process of public buildings and places. The scale tipped toward site-integrated and immovable works beginning in the late 1970s. See Andrews, "Artists and the Visual Definition of Cities," 19.

more accessible and socially responsible, that is, more public. Interestingly the issue of modernist abstract art's interpretive (in)accessibility was defined as a spatial problem by many in the public art field in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For example, Janet Kardon, the curator of the 1980 exhibition "Urban Encounters: Art Architecture Audience," claimed in her catalogue essay:

The way the abstract art work relates to the space of the passer-by is one key to the negative reception that has become a kind of certificate of merit among modern artists. . . . It unsettles perceptions and does not reassure the viewer with an easily shared idea or subject. . . . Entry [into a work] is facilitated when the public perceives the work as performing some useful task, whether it is simply that of shade and seating, or something even remotely associated with the sense of leisure. To be guided through space in a way that rewards the passer-by is of prime value to the public.²⁰

A cocontributor to the same exhibition catalogue, Nancy Foote, took the notion of "entry" more literally, going so far as to say that only site-specific works that "invite the audience in," both physically and iconographically, reveal a public commitment.²¹ Similarly, critics Kate Linker and Lawrence Alloway believed that art that becomes integrated with the physical site offers the greatest sustainability as well as potential for fluid communication and interaction with a general nonart audience. According to Linker, "To the absence of a shared iconography it suggests the shareable presence of space. . . . Just as use insures relevance, so the appeal to space as a social experience, communal scope, individual response, may insure a larger measure of support."²² In these critics' writings of the early 1980s, physical access or entry *into* an art work is imagined to be equivalent to hermeneutic access for the viewer.

The various agencies' programmatic enforcement of a continuity between the art work and its site, however, was predicated on a kind of architectural determinism endemic to most urban beautification efforts. Implicit in such thinking was the belief in an unmediated causal relationship between the aesthetic quality of the built environment and the quality of social conditions it supported. Consequently, the type of site specificity stipulated by the NEA, GSA, and other

²⁰ Janet Kardon, "Street Wise/Street Foolish," in *Urban Encounters*, exh. cat., 8. The exhibition, featuring documentation of projects by artists, architects, and landscape architects, was held between March 19 and April 30, 1980.

²¹ Nancy Foote, "Sightings on Siting," in *Urban Encounters*, 25-34.

²² Linker sees an intimation of a solution in Robert Morris's landscape work *Grand Rapids Project* (1973-1974) in the way durational bodily experience of a particular spatial situation defines the work. See her concluding comments in "Public Sculpture," 70-73. See also Alloway, "Problems of Iconography and Style."

public art agencies was directed toward spatial integration and harmonious design.²³ By now, artists were asked not only to focus on the conditions of the built environment but to contribute toward the design of unified and coherent urban spaces. This is partly why by the end of the 1970s, the NEA endorsed a “wide range of possibilities for art in public situations”—“any permanent media, including earthworks, environmental art, and non-traditional media, such as artificial lighting.”²⁴ The aim was not only to accommodate the changing artistic trends of the period but to align public art more with the production of public amenities and site-oriented projects. What this amounted to in essence was a mandate for public art to be more like architecture and environmental design.



Nancy Holt, *Dark Star Park*, Roslyn, Virginia. 1979-1984. (© Nancy Holt/VAGA, New York)

This integrationist goal was further strengthened when the NEA guidelines were modified once again in 1982, with the Visual Art and Design programs of the NEA officially combining their efforts to encourage the collaboration of visual artists and design professionals. Public art would no longer be just

²³ I am recalling here the distinction made by Rosalyn Deutsche between integrationist and interventionist approaches to site-specific art. In Deutsche’s view, the former seeks to erase visible signs of social problems that might contradict the ideology of unity; the latter seeks to expose them. See her *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), especially the chapters “Uneven Development” and “*Tilted Arc* and the Uses of Democracy.”

²⁴ From the official Art-in-Public-Places grant application guidelines of the Visual Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, as cited by Jacob, “Outside the Loop,” 54.

an autonomous sculpture but would be in some kind of meaningful dialogue with, maybe even coincident with, the surrounding architecture and/or landscape. This approach to site-specific public art was readily adopted by a group of artists, including Athena Tacha, Ned Smyth, Andrea Blum, Siah Armajani, Elyn Zimmerman, and Scott Burton. Unsatisfied with the decorative function of public art in the earlier model of art-in-public-places, and excited by the opportunity to pursue their work outside the confines of museums and galleries at an unprecedented scale and complexity (and with the expectation of addressing a much larger and broader audience), many artists were eager to accept, or at least test, the design team directive. Ideally they would now share responsibilities on equal footing with architects and urban planners in making design decisions about public spaces.²⁵

Adopted in the process was a functionalist ethos that prioritized public art's use value over its aesthetic value, or measured its aesthetic value in terms of use value. This shift, predicated on the desire of many artists and public art agencies to reconcile the division between art and utility—in order to render public art more accessible, accountable, and relevant to the public—conflated the art work's use value, narrowly defined in relation to simple physical needs (such as seating and shading), with social responsibility. As Rosalyn Deutsche has argued, physical utility was reductively and broadly equated with social benefit with this

²⁵ This design team model of public art was more an ideal than a reality. Even in the most successful cases the conventional hierarchy of roles was maintained; that is, the architect assumed leadership and dictated the parameters of the artist's contribution. Part of the problem remains the established patterns of building design and construction. On the benefits and problems of artist-architect design team collaborations, see Donna Graves, "Sharing Space: Some Observations on the Recent History and Possible Future of Public Art Collaborations," *Public Art Review* (Spring/Summer 1993): 10-13; Joan Marter "Collaborations: Artists and Architects on Public Sites," *Art Journal* (Winter 1989): 315-320; Diane Shamash, "The A Team Artists and Architects: Can They Work Together?," *Stroll: The Magazine of Outdoor Art and Street Culture* 6.7 (June 1988): 60-63. An exemplary project following this design team model is the Viewland/Hoffman Substation (1979) in Seattle by Andrew Keating, Sherry Markovitz, Lewis Simpson, artists, and Hobbs/Fukui, architects (commissioned by Seattle Arts Commission and Seattle City Light). For another interesting case study see Steve Rosenthal, *Artists and Architects Collaborate: Designing the Wiesner Building* (Cambridge Mass. MIT Committee on the Visual Arts, 1985).

Siah Armajani has commented with dismay on the design team initiative, in which he participated numerous times: "Public art was a promise that became a nightmare. . . In the first place, the idea of a design team just doesn't work . . . the kind of design team that just gets together around a table is like a situation comedy. It is cynical and unproductive. Genuine debate can't take place around a table in that way. You get what the real estate developer and the arts administrator want because they control the money. The whole emphasis in most of these projects is on who can get along best with the others involved—at the expense of vision and fresh thinking." From Calvin Tompkins "Open, Available, Useful," *New Yorker* (March 19, 1990): 71.

kind of art, and “social activity [was] constricted to narrow problem solving so that the provision of useful objects automatically collapsed into a social good.”²⁶



Lobby of the Wiesner Arts and Media Building at MIT Cambridge, Massachusetts by I. M. Pei & Partners. Bench and railing by Scott Burton, color pattern design on interior walls by Kenneth Noland, exterior plaza paving design by Richard Fleischner, all 1985. (© Steve Rosenthal; courtesy I. M. Pei & Partners)

This collapse was explicit in much public art of the 1980s that followed the collaborative design team model, and was especially notable in the work and words of Scott Burton and his supporters.²⁷ Many artists and critics alike seemed to

²⁶ Deutsche, *Evictions*, 65. Deutsche has provided the most thorough analysis of the universalizing logic of beauty and utility at the basis of public art discourse, which has supported urban redevelopment and gentrification projects. Some public art professionals within the field also recognized early the potential problems with such utilitarianism. For instance, Richard Andrews wrote in 1984, “There is a danger in perceiving contextual projects as a panacea for public art—as a means to reduce controversy and make art ‘useful.’ . . . Legitimate concern exists that function should not become the primary criteria for an institutionalized program of public art. In Seattle we may provide funding for the First Avenue Street project of [Lewis “Buster”] Simpson and [Jack] Mackie, but we would be ill-advised to generate a ‘street improvement program’ of benches, light poles and so on for all artists.” Andrews, “Artists and the Visual Definition of Cities,” 26.

²⁷ For instance, Burton, arguably the most prominent and vocal among artists who espoused this utilitarianism in public art, once said of his street tables and seating design for the Equitable Assur-

think that the more an art work disappeared into the site, either by appropriating urban street furniture (benches and tables, street lamps, manhole covers, fencing) or by mimicking familiar architectural elements (gateways, columns, floors, walls, stairways, bridges, urban plazas, lobbies, parks), the greater its social value would be. During the same time, other artists such as Les Levine, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Group Material, Guerrilla Girls, and Dennis Adams, among many others, were exploring alternative strategies of adopting existing urban forms as sites of artistic intervention. But their appropriation of different modes of public address, particularly those of media and advertising, including billboards, newspapers, and television, usually for the purposes of deconstructing or redirecting their familiar function, did not garner the same kind of official support within the public art industry until later in the decade.²⁸ In the meantime, the more an art work abandoned its distinctive look of “art” to seamlessly assimilate to the site, as defined by the conventions of architecture and urban design, the more it was hailed as a progressive artistic gesture. It is against this prevailing definition of site specificity—one of unified and useful urban design, imagined as a model of social harmony and unity—that Richard Serra proposed a counterdefinition with his massive, wall-like steel sculpture *Tilted Arc*. As early as 1980, several years before he was forced to consolidate his thoughts on site specificity to defend his sculpture for the Federal Plaza site, he explicitly rejected the then widespread tendency of public sculpture to accommodate architectural design. He declared,

There seems to be in this country [United States] right now, especially in sculpture, a tendency to make work which attends to architecture. I am not interested in work which is structurally ambiguous, or in sculpture which satisfies urban design principles. I have always found that to be not only an aspect of mannerism but a need to reinforce a status quo of existing aesthetics. . . . I am interested in sculpture which is non-utilitarian, non-functional . . . any use is a misuse.²⁹

ance Building in New York City: “The social questions interest me more than the art ones. . . . Communal social values are now more important. What office workers do in their lunch hour is more important than my pushing the limits of my self-expression.” As quoted in Douglas C. McGill, “Sculpture Goes Public,” *New York Times Magazine* (April 27, 1986): 67.

²⁸ Such practices are predicated on the conception of the site of art as mobilized and unfixed. As such, the site is not only a venue of presentation but constitutes a mode of distribution as well. I have described this kind of deterritorialized site as a “discursive site.” See chapter 1.

²⁹ Richard Serra, “Rigging,” interview with Gerard Hovagymyan, in *Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc. 1970-1980* (Yonkers, N.Y.: Hudson River Museum, 1980), 128.



Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, Federal Plaza, New York, 1981–1989 (Photo by Ann Chauvet: © Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Considering such an aggressive statement in light of the GSA's guidelines of the same period—"Such [public art] works are intended to be an integral part of the total architectural design and enhance the building's environment for the occupants and the general public"³⁰—it may seem a wonder that Serra was even considered for the Federal Plaza commission. But the incongruity only reminds us of the discrepancy at the heart of the selection process at this time: that is, the discrepancy between the values of the committee of art experts, who obviously responded to Serra's already established international reputation as an artist, and the criteria guiding the administrators of the GSA, who deferred to the experts on issues of artistic merit. In any case, as critics Rosalyn Deutsche and Douglas Crimp have separately affirmed, Serra indeed proposed an interruptive and interventionist model of site specificity, quite explicitly opposed to an integrationist or assimilative one.³¹ Deutsche has argued that public art discourse's use of the term site specificity to connote the creation of harmonious spatial totalities is close to a "terminological abuse," insofar as site-specific art emerged from "the imperative to interrupt, rather than secure, the seeming coherence and closure of those spaces [of the art work's display]."³² In her view, *Tilted Arc* reasserted the critical basis of site specificity, countering its neutralization in the public art of the 1980s. In doing so, it revealed the incompatibility of site specificity with the kind of objectives held by the GSA. My concern here, however, is not so much to establish the right definition of site specificity as to examine the ways in which competing definitions emerge and operate in the public art field, and to assess their varied artistic, social, and political implications and consequences. The terms of Serra's "critical" or "political" site specificity,³³ in fact, remain more ambiguous than one might expect. This is in large part due to the emphasis placed on permanence as a fundamental attribute of site specificity during the *Tilted Arc* controversy. Serra himself mounted his argument against the "relocation" of his sculpture on the premise that, first and foremost, site-specific art has an inviolable physical tie to its site. Hence, to remove the work is to destroy the work. He insisted throughout and after the controversy that

Tilted Arc was conceived from the start as a site-specific sculpture and was not meant to be "site-adjusted" or . . . "relocated."
Site-specific works deal with the environmental components of

³⁰ General Services Administration Factsheet Concerning the Art-in-Architecture Program for Federal Buildings, in Martha Buskirk and Clara Weyergraf-Serra, eds., *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 23.

³¹ See Douglas Crimp, "Serra's Public Sculpture: Redefining Site Specificity" in *Richard Serra: Sculpture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986), 40-56; and Deutsche, *Evictions*, 257-270.

³² Deutsche, *Evictions*, 261.

³³ "Political" site specificity is Deutsche's term, used to distinguish it from "academic" site specificity. *Ibid.*, 261-262.

given places. The scale, size, and location of site-specific works are determined by the topography of the site, whether it be urban or landscape or architectural enclosure. The works become part of the site and restructure both conceptually and perceptually the organization of the site.³⁴

While the insistence on permanence during the court hearings might have had some legal exigency, the priority given to the issue has obscured certain other aspects of *Tilted Arc*'s site specificity.³⁵ For instance, Serra does seem to prioritize the physical relationship between the art work and site in comments like the following from the same article: "The specificity of site-oriented works means that they are conceived for, dependent upon, and inseparable from their locations. The scale, the size, and the placement of sculptural elements result from analysis of the particular environmental components of a given context."³⁶ But he goes on to say that "the preliminary analysis of a given site takes into consideration not only formal but also social and political characteristics of the site. Site-specific works invariably manifest a judgment about the larger social and political context of which they are a part."³⁷

In other words, the site is imagined as a social and political construct as well as a physical one. More importantly Serra envisions not a relationship of smooth continuity between the art work and its site but an antagonistic one in which the art work performs a proactive interrogation—"manifest[s] a judgment" (presumably negative)—about the site's sociopolitical conditions. Indeed, rather than fulfilling an ameliorative function in relation to the site, *Tilted Arc* aggressively cut across and divided it. (No seating, shading, or other physical accommodations here.) In doing so, as proponents of the sculpture have pointed out, *Tilted Arc* literalized the social divisions, exclusions, and fragmentation that manicured and aesthetically tamed public spaces generally disguise. In destroying the illusion of Federal Plaza as a coherent spatial totality, Serra underscored its already dysfunctional status as a public space.

According to Serra, it is only in working against the given site in this way that art can resist cooptation.

³⁴ Richard Serra, "Tilted Arc Destroyed" (1989), reprinted in Richard Serra, *Writings Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 193-213.

³⁵ See Rosalyn Deutsche's critique of the conflation between permanence and universal timelessness during the *Tilted Arc* hearings, in *Evictions*, 264. See also Douglas Crimp's interview comments in "Douglas Crimp on *Tilted Arc*," in Tom Finklepearl, ed., *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 71.

³⁶ Serra, "Tilted Arc Destroyed," 202.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Works which are built within the contextual frame of governmental, corporate, educational, and religious institutions run the risk of being read as tokens of those institutions. . . . Every context has its frame and its ideological overtones. It is a matter of degree. But there are sites where it is obvious that an art work is being subordinated to / accommodated to / adapted to / subservient to / useful to. . . . In such cases it is necessary to work in opposition to the constraints of the context so that the work cannot be read as an affirmation of questionable ideologies and political power. I am not interested in art as affirmation or complicity.³⁸

Thus, in Serra's practice, site specificity is constituted as a precise *discomposure* between the art work and its site. And this discomposure—which is antithetical both to the notion of art's and architecture's complementary juxtaposition, as in the art-in-public-places model, and to that of their seamless continuity as in the art-as-public-spaces model—is intended to bring into relief the repressed social contradictions that underlie public spaces, like Federal Plaza, rendering them perceptible, thus knowable, to the viewing subjects of the sculpture.

It is important to point out at this juncture that, in Serra's case, this critical function of site-specific art is directly tied to a critique of the medium-specific concerns of modernist art.³⁹ As Serra explained, "Unlike modernist works that give the illusion of being autonomous from their surroundings, and which function critically only in relation to the language of their own medium, site-specific works emphasize the comparison between two separate languages and can therefore use the language of one to criticize the language of the other."⁴⁰ So that in addition to working against the physical and sociopolitical conditions of the site, the art work simultaneously addresses the site itself as another *medium*, an "other language." Put a little differently, working against the site coincides with working against the modernist illusion of artistic autonomy. In Serra's case, the "other" to his own language of sculpture is architecture. And architecture, in turn, serves as the material manifestation of "questionable ideologies and political power," which Serra is interested in exposing and subverting. So that in the end, working site-specifically means working against architecture.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid., 203.

³⁹ On this point, see Hal Foster, "The Un/making of Sculpture," in Russell Ferguson, Anthony McCall, and Clara Weyergraf-Serra, eds., *Richard Serra: Sculpture 1985-1998* (Los Angeles and Göttingen, Germany: Museum of Contemporary Art and Steidl Verlag, 1998).

⁴⁰ Buskirk and Weyergraf-Serra, eds., *The Destruction of Tilted Arc*, 12.

⁴¹ Richard Serra's apparent animosity toward architecture is well known and well documented. See his comments in, for instance, his interviews with critic Douglas Crimp and architect Peter Eisenman, both reprinted in Serra, *Writings Interviews*. But Serra's "working against" architecture is not a straightforward opposition. For the most provocative interpretations of Serra's relationship to

This is not to say however, that this “working against” is a straightforward opposition. Note that Serra never speaks, for instance, of merging sculpture and architecture into some new hybrid form to obliterate their categorical distinctions (as so many contemporary artists are prone to do today in the name of radicalizing artistic practice). In fact, the question of sculpture has remained central in his practice over thirty years—not despite but because of the extent to which he has pressured sculpture to the brink of dissolution. As Hal Foster has written recently, “with Serra sculpture becomes its deconstruction, its making becomes its unmaking. . . . To deconstruct sculpture is to serve its ‘internal necessity,’ to extend sculpture in relation to process, embodiment, and site is to remain within it.”⁴² To some readers, this imperative of serving an “internal necessity” may sound like an ontological quest, if not a modernist one, contrary to Serra’s critique of medium specificity. But according to Foster, the paradoxical principle of making sculpture through its unmaking distinguishes a “*medium-differential*” investigation of the category of “sculpture” from a medium-specific one. It acknowledges that sculpture is no longer established in advance or known in certainty, but “must be forever proposed, tested, reworked, and proposed again.”⁴³ Which is to reiterate the point that Serra’s site specificity addresses not only the particular physical, social, and political attributes of a place; it is at the same time engaged in an *art*-specific inquiry or critique (or perhaps art discourse is itself a site), proposing, testing, reworking, and proposing again what sculpture might be. Indeed, for Serra, site specificity has been both a means to move beyond sculpture and simultaneously a “medium”⁴⁴ through which to serve its “internal necessity.”

To the opponents of *Tilted Arc* in the mid 1980s, however, the nuances of such aesthetic concerns did not matter much. In fact, supportive testimonies to the importance of this “great work of art,” or advocating the right of the artist to pursue free expression without governmental interference or censorship, were countered by resentful commentaries of varying animosity.⁴⁵ Some regarded the sculpture as plain, ugly, and brutal, without any artistic merit whatsoever. Some found its presence on the plaza physically and psychologically oppressive. Few waxed nostalgic over the past uses of a (falsely remembered) vitally active public

architecture, see Foster, “The Un/making of Sculpture,” and Yve-Alain Bois, “A Picturesque Stroll around *Clara-Clara*,” October 29 (Summer 1984).

⁴² Foster, “The Un/making of Sculpture,” 17.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁴ Rosalind Krauss has written: “The specificity of the site is not the subject of the work, but—in its articulation of the movement of the viewer’s body-in-destination—its medium.” Krauss, “Richard Serra Sculpture,” in *Richard Serra: Sculpture* (1986), 37.

⁴⁵ See Buskirk and Weyergraf-Serra, eds., *The Destruction of Tilted Arc*, for the record of statements given at the hearings.

plaza (an “oasis of respite and relaxation”),⁴⁶ accusing *Tilted Arc* of destroying this past, of violating a public amenity.⁴⁷ A security expert even testified on the ways in which the sculpture created an impediment to surveillance, encouraging loitering, graffiti, and possible terrorist bomb attacks.



Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, Federal Plaza, New York, 1981-1989)© Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Complaints of this type were presented as the voices of “the people” during the 1985 hearings, and the government officials in charge of the proceedings presumed to speak for the public—on behalf of its needs and interests—in their call for the removal of the sculpture. They characterized *Tilted Arc* as an arrogant and highly inappropriate assertion of a private self on public grounds. The sculpture was viewed, in other words, as another kind of plop art. At the same time, despite the artist’s ardent efforts to maintain a certain “uselessness” for his sculpture (or actually because of this), *Tilted Arc* was instrumentalized by its opponents as a symbol of the overbearing imposition of the federal government (the sponsor of the sculpture) in the lives of “ordinary” citizens and “their” spaces. In

⁴⁶ Representative Theodore Weiss, in Buskirk and Weyergraf-Serra, *The Destruction of Tilted Arc*, 115.

⁴⁷ Joseph Liebman’s testimony for example, paints the plaza prior to the installation of *Tilted Arc* as an idyllic setting with children playing, mothers strolling with baby carriages, etc. See Buskirk and Weyergraf-Serra, eds., *The Destruction of Tilted Arc*, 113. Such memory is strongly contradicted by Douglas Crimp, a resident of the neighborhood. See his remarks concerning the somewhat dysfunctional state of the plaza prior to *Tilted Arc* in “Douglas Crimp on *Tilted Arc*,” 71-72.

the end, the removal of *Tilted Arc* was characterized as tantamount to the reclaiming of public space by the “community”—narrowly defined as those living or working in the immediate neighborhoods around Federal Plaza.

But as Rosalyn Deutsche has argued, the meaning of key words deployed during this conflict, such as “use,” “public,” “public use,” and “community” were presumed to be self-evident, based on “common sense.” Even those of the left who supported *Tilted Arc* did not contest in any effective way the essential and universalizing definitions of these terms—and their ideological uses in the very name of neutrality and objectivity—as they framed the entire debate.⁴⁸ In Deutsche’s view, the opportunity was regrettably missed, both during the hearings and after (especially with the publication of the documents pertaining to the controversy), to challenge the authoritarian uses of these terms in the name of “the people,” a tendency that is not exclusive to right-wing politicians but prevalent in left-informed public art discourse as well. She has also reminded us that the final decision to remove *Tilted Arc* was not a decision against public art in general, for city governments, corporations, and real estate developers have long understood the benefits of public art in mobilizing support for redevelopment and gentrification of urban spaces. Instead, according to Deutsche, *Tilted Arc*’s removal was a discrediting of a particular model of public art—or a particular model of site specificity, as I would insist—one without obvious utilitarian pay-offs, one that critically questions rather than promotes the fantasies of public space as a unified totality without conflicts or difference.

While similarly intense debates have accompanied the unveiling of numerous public art works of the past,⁴⁹ the *Tilted Arc* incident made most clear that public art is not simply a matter of giving “public access to the best art of our times outside museum walls.”⁵⁰ In fact, much more was riding on the *Tilted Arc* case than the fate of a single art work. Unlike prior public art disputes, this controversy as one of the most high-profile battlegrounds for the broad-based “culture wars” of the late 1980s, put to the test the very life of public funding for the arts in the United States.⁵¹ This is why critics like Deutsche have insisted that

⁴⁸ Deutsche, *Evictions*, 259.

⁴⁹ Some prominent cases include Pablo Picasso’s sculpture at the Chicago Civic Center (1965), Alexander Calder’s *La Grande Vitesse* in Grand Rapids, Michigan (1967), George Sugarman’s *Baltimore Federal* (1975-1977), and Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington, D.C. (1982). For more on other public art controversies, see Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture*, especially chapter six, and Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs*.

⁵⁰ Initial goals of the NEA’s Art-in-Public-Places Program as stated in its guidelines and cited in Finklepearl, ed. *Dialogues in Public Art*, 43.

⁵¹ Of course, Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* and Robert Mapplethorpe’s homosexually explicit X-portfolio photographs drew as much, if not more attention during these years. See Richard Bolton, ed., *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press 1992).

conflicts such as the one over *Tilted Arc* reveal the extent to which public art discourse functions as a site of political struggle over the meaning of democracy.⁵²

Perhaps recognizing the political stakes more self-consciously than ever, public art practitioners and administrators engaged in considerable soul-searching following the *Tilted Arc* debate, reexamining the fundamental questions of public art's goals and procedures. For even if the various testimonies against *Tilted Arc* could be dismissed as uninformed populist thinking, or as motivated by corrupt reactionary politics, or as simply wrong-headed, some complaints had to be taken seriously for at least two reasons. First, it was a matter of survival. In the tide of neoconservative Republicanism during the 1980s, with the attack on governmental funding for the arts (the NEA in particular) reaching a hysterical pitch by 1989, public art programs had to strategically rearticulate their goals and methods in order to avoid the prospect of annihilation or complete privatization (which might amount to the same thing). Secondly, even those public art professionals most sympathetic to Serra's cause had to recognize that there was a bit of truth in some of the criticism. For the point of contestation that mattered most was not so much the artistic merit of Serra's sculpture but the exclusionary (and some did say elitist) commissioning procedures of public art agencies like the GSA and the NEA. Congressman Theodore Weiss testified against *Tilted Arc* during the hearings in these terms:

Tilted Arc was imposed upon this neighborhood without discussion, without prior consultation, without any of the customary dialogue that one expects between government and its people. The National Endowment for the Arts panel of three selected the artist and a three person group from the General Services Administration in Washington, D.C., approved the design. No one else—not from the community or its representatives, not the architects, not even the Regional Administrators—was ever consulted. These panels, no matter how expert or how well-intentioned, are not so omnipotent or infallible in their judgments that they cannot be challenged or improved upon.⁵³

Arguably the seeds of this argument—that *Tilted Arc* was absolutely inappropriate to the site because the top-down decision-making process, dictated by small review panels of art experts and bureaucrats, did not involve the members of the local community—has had the most far-reaching impact on the direction of the public art discourse of the 1990s. Even before the blowup over *Tilted*

⁵² Deutsche, *Evictions*, 267.

⁵³ Representative Theodore Weiss in Buskirk and Weyergraf-Serra, eds, *The Destruction of Tilted Arc*, 116.

Arc, some public artists and administrators had recognized that the site of a public art work had to be imagined beyond its physical attributes. Ideally, the work should engage the site socially instigating “community involvement.” But initially, this seems to have been motivated primarily by the need to forestall potentially hostile reception of certain public art works. In 1979, for example, when the NEA requested that its grant recipients provide “methods to insure an informed community response to the project,”⁵⁴ the community was still conceived as an inadequately prepared audience. The community, in other words, needed to be engaged in order to soften them to the “best art of our time,” to educate them in its proper interpretation and appreciation (not unlike the way audience groups are commonly treated in museums).⁵⁵ But by the late 1980s, and certainly by the time of *Tilted Arc*’s removal, “community involvement” meant more. At the bureaucratic level, it meant the expanded inclusion of nonart community representatives in the selection panels and review committees of public art commissions. More significantly it suggested a dialogue between the artist and his/her immediate audience, with the possibility of community participation, even collaboration, in the making of the art work. For many artists and administrators with long-standing commitments to community-based practices since the 1960s, or what Suzanne Lacy has retroactively called “new genre public art,” an intensive engagement with the people of the site, involving direct communication and interaction over an extended period of time, had been a well-established tenet of socially responsible and ethically sound public art. That such a model of public art was marginalized, even denigrated, by the official public art establishment for over three decades⁵⁶ must have made the *Tilted Arc* incident a point of profound ambivalence for many community-oriented practitioners. Even though some public artists and administrators were traumatized by the *Tilted Arc* controversy and its outcome,⁵⁷ the sculpture’s removal from Federal Plaza, when viewed as a triumphal rejection of “high art” by “the people,” also signaled an implicit validation of the community-oriented approach to public art.

The discursive emergence of new genre public art in 1989, in fact, coincides with the removal of *Tilted Arc*,⁵⁸ and Lacy subsequently refers to the *Tilted*

⁵⁴ As cited in Lacy ed., *Mapping the Terrain*, 22-24.

⁵⁵ Suzanne Lacy has remarked that even with the “maturation” of site specific public art through the 1980s in which greater attention was paid to the historical, ecological, and sociological aspects of a site, the works generally did not engage audiences in a manner markedly different from those in museums. Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain*, 23.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁷ Finklepearl, ed., *Dialogues in Public Art*, 34-35.

⁵⁸ According to Lacy, the theorization of “new genre public art” emerged from a lecture program sponsored by the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1989 entitled “City Sites: Artists and Urban Strategies.” “A series of lectures was delivered at nontraditional sites in Oakland by ten artists whose work addressed a particular constituency on specific issues but also stood as a prototype for a wider range of human concerns.” The term was officially coined for a three day symposium.

Arc case as an occasion “when office workers’ demands to remove the sculpture from the site in a civic plaza led to calls for greater public accountability by artists.”⁵⁹ The controversy is cast as an exemplary instance of “the conventions of artistic expression . . . com[ing] into conflict with public opinion,” with public opinion winning.⁶⁰ Of course, such a reading of the *Tilted Arc* incident unquestioningly accepts the terms of the debate as defined by the sculpture’s opponents. It challenges instead Serra’s critique of conventions of artistic expression as itself conventional. In the view of many public artists and administrators, Serra did little to complicate, for instance, the security of individual authorship; in fact, during the hearings, he seemed to argue for its inviolability against the wishes of “the public.” Moreover, they saw that Serra’s artistic pursuit, no matter how complex and genuine its critical engagement with the site and its sociopolitical issues, was still driven primarily by art-specific concerns that had little bearing on the lives of the people who constitute the actual, rather than abstract or metaphorical, reality of the site. Therefore, the radicalizing effects of his art work remained narrowly confined to art discourse only legible to a limited, art-educated audience, appreciated most notably by a small group of influential voices professionally ensconced in art criticism, art history and the museum world.

Indeed, Lacy implicates Serra in such statements as: “Although the move to exhibit art in public places was a progressive one, the majority of artists accommodated themselves to the established museum system, continuing to focus their attention on art critics and museum-going connoisseurs.”⁶¹ Whereas numerous art experts confirmed the radicality of *Tilted Arc*’s aesthetic and social critique, then, those aligned with community-based public art did not find the work radical enough.⁶² Insofar as Serra never opens up the creative process to a collaboration or dialogue with the community (he has in fact disdained the need for art to please its audience as well as its sponsors), and insofar as the sculpture’s particular form of criticality coalesces as Serra’s “signature,” his work is held to have no impact on the hermetic boundaries of the art world and its institutionalized hierarchies of value. From this point of view, works like *Tilted Arc* are an unwanted encroachment of art world values into the spaces of everyday life and people, and an individual’s artistic concerns are, by definition, antithetical to a socially progressive way of thinking. In this way a peculiar alignment developed

sium organized by Lacy and others, “Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art,” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in November 1991. Lacy ed., *Mapping the Terrain*, 11.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 24.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Others not necessarily aligned with new genre public art have also registered a sense of disappointment at Serra’s work not being “radical” enough. See Finklepearl, ed., *Dialogues in Public Art*, 35. See also James Meyer’s critique of *Tilted Arc*’s “negative” monumentality in “The Functional Site,” *Documents* 7 (Fall 1994): 20-29.

between the “authoritarian populism”⁶³ of the right and the community advocacy of the new genre public art type on the left. Both rejected a certain kind of critical art in the name of “the people.”⁶⁴

Certainly by the spring of 1986, little over a year after the hearings on *Tilted Arc*, the directive to involve the community in the public art process was being taken more seriously in New York City and elsewhere, with the NEA taking the lead in 1983 with instructions to include “plans for community involvement, preparation, and dialogue.”⁶⁵ So that when it came to choosing an artist for the Percent for Art commission at the 44th Precinct police station in the South Bronx, John Ahearn was an “obvious choice” for the selection panel, which now included several nonart representatives.⁶⁶ According to Tom Finklepearl, former Director of New York City’s Percent for Art program, Ahearn “was an obvious choice because he lived close to the station, enjoyed a good critical reputation, and had already spent many years interacting with the community . . . He was well acquainted with the specific nature of the community within which the commission was sited, and worked in a figurative style that is considered accessible.”⁶⁷ In other words, Ahearn represented the antithesis of Serra; or in Finklepearl’s words, “Ahearn fit the mold for the ‘post-Serra’ artist perfectly”⁶⁸

Certainly the differences between the two artists are striking. Serra came into prominence in the late 1960s, with the emergence of postminimalism and

⁶³ The phrase is borrowed from Stuart Hall’s critique of the cultural politics of Margaret Thatcher’s England in “Popular Democratic vs Authoritarian Populism: Two Ways of ‘Taking Democracy Seriously,’” in *The Hard Road to Renewal. Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), 123-149. Rosalyn Deutsch explains the concept succinctly as “the mobilization of democratic discourses to sanction, indeed to pioneer, shifts toward state totalitarianism.” Deutsche, *Evictions*, 266.

⁶⁴ This undertheorized alliance set the stage for the identity politics and political correctness debates of the early 1990s. In terms of public art, little room was left for bold, ambitious artistic statements that did not engage social issues or the “community.”

⁶⁵ This directive expanded in the early 1990s to include “educational activities which invite community involvement” See Lacy ed., *Mapping the Terrain*, 24. For a sample case of the shift in attitude toward greater community participation in public art, see Tom Finklepearl’s assessment of the 1999 community cultural plan of Portland, Maine, in his *Dialogues in Public Art*, 43-44.

⁶⁶ Finklepearl, ed., *Dialogues in Public Art*, 81.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 81-82. Art historian Erika Doss has pointed out that “throughout the 1980s, the NEA [and state arts agencies] avoided funding public art projects that were specifically commemorative or representational,” preferring modern abstract art of artists such as Stephen Antonakos, Robert Irwin, Richard Fleischner, Tony Smith, Mark di Suvero, Mary Miss, Athena Tacha, and Richard Serra. She argues that the aesthetic vocabulary of abstraction, which is not shared by the general audience (who seem to prefer easily understandable symbolism), is one main source of the many public art controversies of the 1980s. It is important to note that the NEA corrected itself in the late 1980s, however, with the following addition to their guidelines: “The [NEA] must not, under any circumstances, impose a single aesthetic standard or attempt to direct artistic content.” Doss claims that with such a revised vision, the NEA increased funding for representational art, such as public murals, in the 1990s. See Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs*, 51, fn. 24.

⁶⁸ Finklepearl, ed., *Dialogues in Public Art*, 82.

process art in particular, as part of the American neo-avant-garde generation. He is distinguished by art historians and art institutions worldwide as one of the most important sculptors of the twentieth century. Ahearn found an audience in the



John Ahearn view of South Bronx Sculpture Park (at 44th Precinct Police Station), with sculptures of Raymond and Tobey, Daleesha, and Corey on day of installation, 1991 (© Ari Marcopoulos; courtesy Alexander and Bonin Gallery, New York.)

very late 1970s and early 1980s during the rise of the alternative art scenes in the East Village and the Bronx. He remains biographically linked to the South Bronx and is modestly self-described as an “itinerant portrait painter.”⁶⁹

The most significant difference relevant to our discussion, however, is the fact that whereas Serra intended an aggressively interruptive function for his sculpture on Federal Plaza, Ahearn sought an assimilative one for his at Jerome Avenue. Ahearn imagined a continuity rather than a rupture between his sculptures and the social life of the neighborhood where the works were to be displayed and to which they “belonged.” This is not to say that he did not recognize the potential for conflict with, specifically, the 44th Precinct police officers. After

⁶⁹ John Ahearn, quoted in Jane Kramer, *Whose Art Is It?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 39. For a detailed overview of Ahearn’s practice from 1979 to 1991, see the exhibition catalogue *South Bronx Hall of Fame: Sculptures by John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, 1991).



John Ahearn, working with neighborhood children, Bronx, New York, 1985.

all, few of them had hoped for an art work depicting the local police presence as congenial and welcomed. But Ahearn's acknowledgment of the police as a key audience group only deepened his commitment to creating an accurate and humane representation of the site's reality as he knew it. He wanted to counter the prevalent negative stereotypes of the Bronx (harbored by the police in particular and promoted by the mass media) as a place of urban decay and economic devastation, as a dangerous and violent place infested with drug dealers, criminals, prostitutes, gangs, and disease.⁷⁰ Instead, he wanted his work to embody what he called the "South Bronx attitude"⁷¹ — resilient, proud, un-

pretentious, and "real." In attempting to capture the authenticity of the site in this way Ahearn in effect intended a different model of site specificity, a community-based realism that countered the example of Serra's *Tilted Arc*, which itself was a counterposition to the art-as-public spaces model of public art.

Clearly Ahearn understood that to produce a mural or any other architectural embellishment for the new police station, as was suggested to him at an

⁷⁰ For an informative review of art dealing with the stereotypes and realities of life in the Bronx, see *Urban Mythologies: The Bronx Represented since the 960s* (Bronx: Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1999), the catalogue of an exhibition curated by Lydia Yee and Betti-Sue Hertz.

⁷¹ Ahearn as quoted in Kramer, *Whose Art Is It?*, 38.

early stage of the commission, would be a terrible mistake.⁷² In fact, it was his decision, and not that of the Department of Cultural Affairs or the Department of General Services (DGS), to work with the dead space of the traffic triangle facing the station precisely in order to *confront* the station rather than be part of it. At some level, he had internalized Serra's earlier insight that "works which are built within the contextual frame of governmental, corporate, educational, and religious institutions run the risk of being read as tokens of those institutions."⁷³ But while Ahearn resisted making his art work a token of various institutions of power, privilege, and authority—the police, the Department of Cultural Affairs, the art world—he actively sought ways to submit the work to, to put it in service of, the largely African American and Puerto Rican community of his neighborhood. Ahearn attempted to resist the function of site-specific public art to support the ideologies and political power of dominant social groups, affirming instead his allegiance to those groups disempowered and marginalized by these ideologies and power.

The artist's identification with the local community of blacks and Latinos developed more or less organically over a decade. Since 1980 Ahearn had been living on Walton Avenue between 171st and 172nd streets, just a few blocks from the traffic triangle. Even as his artistic career ascended through the decade, with exhibitions in "legitimate" art world venues, he maintained the center of his art and life there in a sixth floor slum apartment. He produced most of his art directly on the street: he regularly set up shop on the sidewalk outside his studio, casting portraits of neighborhood residents, including many children and teenagers, who often contributed comments on how they would like to be represented. By making two copies of every portrait, one for him to keep and the other to be taken home by the sitter, Ahearn devised a very specific economy of intimate exchange and local distribution for his art. Even as he exhibited and sold some of the portraits as fine art through his SoHo gallery, he also made sure that they became part of the everyday culture of his neighborhood, proudly displayed by individuals in their living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, and dining rooms.

In many street casting sessions, he collaborated with Rigoberto (Robert) Torres,⁷⁴ an artist from the neighborhood whom Ahearn had met in 1979 after an exhibition of his relief sculptures at Fashion Moda, an alternative gallery space that had opened a year before on Third Avenue and 149th Street.⁷⁵ Between 1981

⁷² Ibid., 74-75.

⁷³ Serra, "Tilted Arc Destroyed," 203.

⁷⁴ Torres worked first as an assistant, then as partner of Ahearn through the 1980s. They have each credited the other with opening up their work and life. See Kramer, *Whose Art Is It?*, especially pp. 58-60 and 120-125 on the relationship between the two artists.

⁷⁵ Fashion Moda was an alternative gallery space founded by Stefan Eins, an Austrian artist, in 1978, that operated for about ten years. The importance of this space in the burgeoning of the "alternative scene" in the early 1980s cannot be underestimated. According to Marshall Berman's chronicle of the Bronx, "For a decade or more, Fashion Moda brought downtown artists, musicians,

and 1985, Torres and Ahearn together produced four very popular sculptural murals for the sides of tenement buildings—*We Are Family*, *Life on Dawson Street*, *Double Dutch*, and *Back to School*—that picture quotidian aspects of life in the neighborhood. Even though some art critics judged these wall works and other cast pieces to be overly sentimental, and even though the artist himself worried at times that they were too much like folk art, as long as the work made his neighbors “happy,” Ahearn thought of them as achieving more meaningful and difficult goals than what is usually expected of an art work. In his words, the “discipline of ‘happy’ is just as important as the discipline of ‘strong’ or ‘tough,’” and the cast sculptures made to please a neighbor are “purer than something with too much of myself in it, something individual.”⁷⁶



John Ahearn & Rigoberto Torres, *Homage to the People of the Bronx: Double Dutch at Kelly Street I* (Frieda, Jevette, Towana, Stacey), 1981-82. Cast fiberglass sculptures, 10' x 20'. Intervale Avenue at Kelly Street.

and writers together with uptown graffiti painters, rappers, break dance crews, and curious people who came in from off the street. Eins was immensely resourceful at working various government bureaucracies and helping artists get space to mount innovative installations in schools and parks, in abandoned apartment buildings (there were so many), and on the streets.” See Marshall Berman, “Views from the Burning Bridge,” in *Urban Mythologies*, exh. cat., 76. Also see Betti-Sue Hertz’s essay “Artistic Intervention in the Bronx” in the same exhibition catalogue, 18-27.

⁷⁶ John Ahearn as quoted in Kramer, *Whose Art Is It?*, 111.

Through sustained years of intimate collaborative exchanges and in situ interactions, Ahearn naturally came to see himself as integral to the culture of the neighborhood (as many others did). As relayed by Jane Kramer, the author of a lengthy *New Yorker* article on this South Bronx project (later published as a book), the artist believed that with Robert Torres he was “part of what was happening in the Bronx, part of the integrity of the neighborhood, and solidly at home.”⁷⁷ Because of this, the artist saw the site on Jerome Avenue not so much as an abstract formal entity but as an extension of the community of which he himself was a part. Ahearn’s personal history and sense of identity was directly tied to the location. And this continuity is what made him such an “obvious choice” for the Department of Cultural Affairs as well as other city agencies and committees, including the Bronx Community Board Four, which reviewed the maquettes for the project in 1990 and gave its “community” approval without hesitation.



Raymond and Toby, 1989, oil on fiberglass, 47 x 43 x 39 inches

Yet the attacks against Ahearn and the sculptures that finally led to their removal were exactly on the grounds that neither belonged to the “community” that the sculptures were inappropriate for the site. At one end were officials from the Department of General Services who were overseeing the station building

⁷⁷ Ahearn as quoted in *ibid.*, 60.

project as a whole. Arthur Symes, a black architect, who had newly taken on the role of assistant commissioner in charge of design and construction management, and Claudette LaMelle, a black administrator and executive assistant to the commissioner of the DGS, felt that regardless of his outstanding reputation as an artist and his track record living and working in the South Bronx, Ahearn, as a white man, could never understand the experience of the African American “community.” Thus he had no capacity to represent it accurately for or in the Bronx. They charged that, in fact, the sculptures were racist.⁷⁸ On the other end were the complaints of a small group of residents from an apartment building at the Jerome Avenue traffic triangle, who found the sculptures an absolute misrepresentation of *their* community. They accused Ahearn of glorifying illegitimate members of the community or, “roof people,” according to Mrs. Salgado, the most vocal opponent of the sculptures. In their eyes, Ahearn had literally and symbolically elevated the derelict, criminal, and delinquent elements of the community. They argued that in essence Ahearn promoted the outsider’s view of the Bronx with negative stereotypes (the two male figures in particular), and that with these sculptures he affirmed the police’s distorted perceptions of the community exacerbating the already tense relations with them.

In Ahearn’s view, of course, the three sculptures—of Daleesha, a young black teenage girl on roller skates; Corey a large shirtless black man leaning over a boom box, holding a basketball; and Raymond, a slender Puerto Rican man in a hooded sweatshirt, squatting next to his pit bull—represented a certain truth about the neighborhood. Perhaps not a truth that everyone would want to embrace, but an indigenous truth nonetheless. He found Daleesha, Corey and Raymond (whom he knew personally, the last two as friends even) appropriate subjects to commemorate as survivors of the mean streets. He wanted to capture their humanity and make its beauty visible to the policemen at the 44th Precinct as well as to the neighbors, in the hope of ameliorating the sense of distrust and hostility between them. As Kramer notes, Ahearn “wanted the police to acknowledge them, and he wanted the neighbors, seeing them cast in bronze and up on pedestals, to stop and think about who they were. . . . John wanted them to stand in something of the same relation to the precinct policemen that they do to him and the neighbors. They may be trouble, but they are human, and they are there.”⁷⁹ Despite Ahearn’s earnest intentions, however, the sculptures provoked anger rather than empathy among many neighbors.⁸⁰ In fact, the sculptures were seen as an insult to the community in that they depicted people most neighbors

⁷⁸ Arthur Symes and Claudette LaMelle made these charges without actually seeing the work. Their criticism was based on a few Polaroid snapshots taken at the foundry before the sculptures were painted. Perhaps for this reason they misidentified Raymond as black rather than Puerto Rican.

⁷⁹ Kramer, *Whose Art Is It?*, 38.

⁸⁰ Thanks to Juliet Koss for helpful discussions on the history of empathy theory in aesthetic philosophy.

found menacing, fearsome, and threatening—the kind of people that they would want police protection *from*. As Angela Salgado, Mrs. Salgado’s daughter, put it, it was people like Corey and Raymond that made “the difference between a working-class neighborhood and a ghetto.” As such, she also charged the sculptures with being “totems of racism.”⁸¹ Within the context of early 1990s multiculturalist identity politics and political correctness debates (do-good community-based public art is itself a symptom of this period), such accusations were perhaps too tricky to counter. Ahearn did not even attempt arguing against them in any systematic or sustained way. Initially he tried speaking to the few detractors who gathered at the site, especially Mrs. Salgado. He approached her respectfully to have a dialogue—to introduce himself and his work, and to listen to her. He even repainted Raymond’s face the morning after installation to have him appear less menacing, less “Halloween,” so that Mrs. Salgado might see “the other Raymond,” “beautiful *and* heavy.”⁸² But he could not dissuade her from seeing his bronzes as evil and ugly, a “slap in the community’s face.” In the end, Mrs. Salgado’s objections and his inability to convince her became a measure of the work’s failure for Ahearn.

To the art world, my bronzes were serious, ironic. They had oomph, they were strong. They were an “artist’s” pieces, and they looked good at the site, but I thought that day, “They’ll never look like this again.” I knew that soon they’d look terrible. Bad. Uglier than Mrs. Salgado said. So I said, “Fuck ‘em, the art world!” It’s not my job to be fighting these conservative progressive people—people like Mrs. Salgado. I respect these people. It’s not my job to be the punk artist in the neighborhood—like, there’s a lot going on in my artistic life besides this installation. There’s my concept of casts in people’s homes—the execution may be shoddy, but to me those casts are more valuable than a bronze, or a better piece in a collector’s home, and if I’ve misread my people it means I’ve misread myself and my concept. . . . What I felt was, I had a choice. . . . Either I was going to be on Mrs. Salgado’s side or I was going to be her enemy I refused that.⁸³

⁸¹ Angela Salgado, as quoted by Kramer, *Whose Art Is It?*, 109.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 100-102.

⁸³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 103.



John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres, *Back to School*, installed at Walton Avenue and 172nd Street, Bronx, New York, 1985 (Photo by Ivan Dalla Tana; courtesy Alexander and Bonin Gallery, New York.)

Acknowledging that he had miscalculated the situation, he removed the sculptures at his own expense five days after their installation. Thus a project that began as one made with, of, and for the community, by an artist presumed to be an integral part of that community and approved by a committee of community leaders, was in the end disowned by the community. In a recent interview, Ahearn has remarked on the nature of the site itself as part of the problem:

In previous times when we installed the wall murals a supportive community would all come out in strength to view their friends being hoisted up on the wall. It was a family situation. Whereas the installation of the bronzes was a little bit removed from the neighborhood that I lived in, even though it was only four blocks away. It was just far enough away that it only got a stray group of onlookers that I recognized. Unlike earlier days, the few friends of mine from downtown that showed up outnumbered the local community which made me a bit uneasy. There was a disquiet to the day. Already as the pieces were unveiled, there were arguments at the site as to the purpose of the work. That had never happened with the murals. In earlier times, the murals were seen as a private thing within the community but this was instantly understood to be of a citywide, public nature. This was perceived as a city site. . . . People could tell the difference. People felt that this had to do with the city not with their community.⁸⁴

Of course, the ambiguity of the term “community” is one of the central issues here. At any one time, depending on who is speaking, the community could be the people around a few buildings on Walton Avenue, where Ahearn, Daleesha, Corey and Raymond are familiar faces; or it could be the group of people living several blocks away on Jerome Avenue, where Ahearn, Daleesha, Corey and Raymond are viewed as outsiders; or it could be constituencies delineated by the outlines of voting districts; or it might conjure “the Bronx” as an almost mythical place; or then again, it may not be tied to a geographical area at all but defined instead in terms of a shared historical and racial background, as was the case with the administrators at the DGS in their presumption of a singular African American community.

In Ahearn’s case, it is relatively easy to trace these various expectations at work, both within the artist’s practice and outside it. The rationale behind the selection of him for the South Bronx commission, as cited earlier, is a case in point. But the later contestation over Ahearn’s capacity and right to represent the

⁸⁴ “John Ahearn on the Bronx Bronzes and Happier Tales,” in Finklepearl, ed., *Dialogues in Public Art*, 91-92.

community and the accompanying protests against the choice of Daleesha, Corey and Raymond as representative of the community are also based on such expectations. That is, while there may be disagreements among different groups over the specifics, the dominant principle or operative basis of community-based site specificity is the presumption of a unity of identity between the artist and the community and between the community and the art work. Indeed, the commonality of this belief is the source of the disagreements, as we have seen in Ahearn's case.

The ambiguity of the term "community" which is consistent with the discursive slippage around "audience,"⁸⁵ "site," and "public," is itself a distinctive trait of community-based public art discourse. As such, the claims made of and for the "community" by artists, curators, administrators, critics, and various audience groups demand extensive critical analysis. To contribute to that end, I will delineate here what seems to be the underlying logic of community-based site specificity as exemplified by Ahearn's South Bronx project, some aspects of which have been already outlined in contrast to the site specificity of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*.

As noted earlier, Ahearn, like many other community-based artists, wished to create a work integrated with the site—a work that would seem to emerge so naturally from a particular place, whose meaning is so specifically linked to it, that it could not be imagined belonging anywhere else. But unlike the physical integration of the art-as-public-spaces paradigm (which Serra likewise rejected), Ahearn's community-based site specificity emphasized a social integration. This is in part due to the fact that the site itself is here conceived as a social entity, a "community," and not simply in terms of environmental or architectural design. But more importantly the emphasis on the social stems from the belief that the meaning or value of the art work does not reside in the object itself but is accrued over time through the interaction between the artist and the community. This interaction is considered to be integral to the art work and equal in significance (it may even be thought of as constituting the art work). What this means is that the *artist's assimilation* into a given community now coincides with the *art work's integration* with the site. The prior goal of integration and harmony in terms of unified urban design is reorganized around the *performative* capacity of the artist to become one with the community. And this "becoming one," no matter how temporary is presumed to be a prerequisite for an artist to be able to speak with, for, and as a legitimate representative or member of the com-

⁸⁵ For instance, in Ahearn's case, the artist viewed the primary audience as residents of the neighborhood and the police officers of the 44th Precinct, who would be literally facing the sculptures at the traffic triangle. In contrast, the opponents of the sculptures conceived the audience as being comprised of strangers from the "outside world," mostly white people passing by their neighborhood in cars on their way to nearby Yankee Stadium.

munity. Simultaneously the characteristics of this “unity” function as criteria for judging the artistic authenticity and ethical fitness of the art work.

In most cases, community-based site specificity also seeks to bring about another kind of integration between the community and the work of art. A group of people previously held at a distance from the artistic process, under abstract designations of viewer/spectator, audience, or public, are enlisted in this case to participate in the creation of an art work. Sometimes this absorption of the community into the artistic process and vice versa is rendered iconographically readable, as, for example, in the literalist realism of John Ahearn’s cast sculptures. At other times, when the art work is conceptually oriented, with priority given to the collective process and social interaction, with or without the guarantee of any material outcome, this absorption is more difficult to track. But a central objective of community-based site specificity is the creation of a work in which members of a community—as simultaneously viewer/spectator, audience, public, and referential subject—will see and recognize themselves in the work, not so much in the sense of being critically implicated but of being affirmatively pictured or validated.

This investment corresponds to an old imperative of public art: rather than art works that are separated or detached from the space of the audience, which reinforce social alienation and disaffection, one should sponsor works that reassure the viewing subject with something familiar and known. We can recall Janet Kardon’s comment that in order for a public art work to be meaningful to the public (thus, meaningfully public), it should not “unsettle perceptions” but “reassure the viewer with an easily shared idea or subject.”⁸⁶ In 1980, when these words were written, Kardon encouraged “sharing” through art that either performs a “useful task,” such as providing shade or seating, or conjures an association with a “sense of leisure”—generic qualities she presumed to be desired and esteemed by all. In contrast, proponents of 1990s community-based public art have argued for the specificity of certain audience groups (i.e., communities), the basic sentiment being that the desires and needs of a particular community cannot be presumed to be so generic, and cannot be declared a priori by an artist or anyone else outside of that community. Therefore, the task of “reassur[ing] the viewer with an easily shared idea or subject” is best accomplished when the idea or subject of the art work is determined by the community, or better yet if it is the community itself in some way.

This principle holds true even in public art projects based in conceptual or performance art, which do not yield concrete material manifestations (that is, literal representations of the people of the community). For if we identify “the work” as the dialogue and collaboration between an artist and a community group, we conjure a picture of the community nonetheless, albeit in different

⁸⁶ Kardon, “Street Wise/Street Foolish,” 8.

terms, precisely of work. In eschewing object (read commodity) production, many community-based artists, often with the help of curators, administrators, and sponsors, orchestrate situations in which community participants invest time and energy in a collective project or process. This investment of labor would seem to secure the participants' sense of identification with "the work," or at least a sense of ownership of it, so that the community sees itself in "the work" not through an iconic or mimetic identification but through the recognition of its own *labor* in the creation of, or becoming of, "the work." Although the concept of labor rarely appears in public art discourse, and although the issue cannot be pursued in adequate depth here, it seems crucial to note the need to consider the representative function of labor within the context of community-based art practice generally.⁸⁷ For now, I can simply propose that the drive toward identifica-



Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, Federal Plaza, New York, 1981–1989.

tory unity that propels today's form of community-based site specificity is a desire to model or enact unalienated collective labor, predicated on an idealistic assumption that artistic labor is itself a special form of unalienated labor, or at least provisionally outside of capitalism's forces.

But if the pursuit of identificatory unity, as I have described it thus far, is in part an updated means to "reassure the viewer with an easily shared idea or subject," the question remains: What exactly is reassured by it? And what does this reassurance guarantee? While it is not prudent to overgeneralize, a preliminary answer, pointing to both the hazards and hopes of contemporary public art, can begin with the observation that the viewer is affirmed in his/her self-knowledge and world view through the artwork's mechanisms of (self-) iden-

⁸⁷ On this important issue, see George Yudice, "Producing the Cultural Economy: The Collaborative Art of inSITE," in his *The Expediency of Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

tification. Underlying decades of public art discourse is a presumption that the art work—as object, event, or process—can fortify the viewing (now producing) subject by protecting it from the conditions of social alienation, economic fragmentation, and political disenfranchisement that threaten, diminish, exclude, marginalize, contradict, and otherwise “unsettle” its sense of identity. Alongside this belief is an unspoken imperative that the art work should affirm rather than disturb the viewer’s sense of self. A culturally fortified subject, rendered whole and unalienated through an encounter or involvement with an art work, is imagined to be a *politically* empowered social subject with opportunity (afforded by the art project) and capacity (understood as innate) for artistic self-representation (= political self-determination). It is, I would argue, the production of such “empowered” subjects, a reversal of the aesthetically politicized subjects of the traditional avant-garde, that is the underlying goal of much community-based, site-specific public art today.⁸⁸

While the complexities and paradoxes of current public art discourse remain unresolved, the need to rethink the operations of the existing models of site specificity is unambiguous. And the seeming failure of the two most recent paradigms—as exemplified in Serra’s disruptive model based in sculpture, and Ahearn’s assimilative model based in community interaction—isolates some of the terms of that rethinking. *Tilted Arc* is a seminal instance of a nonassimilative, oppositional mode of site specificity that, while vilified by many has been lauded by others for its critical capacity to challenge the prevailing tendency of public art to cover over the many contradictions that underlie public space. John Ahearn’s project in the South Bronx, while contrarily an assimilative and integrationist effort, similarly illuminates the conflicted nature of the public sphere. If we are to measure a public art work’s critical capacity in relation to the ways in which the work itself becomes a site of contestation over what constitutes something as public,⁸⁹ then the conflicts surrounding these two works underscore the lack of agreement over what we mean by and expect from, an “interventionary” site specificity.

⁸⁸ A reversal because the traditional avant-garde did not seek to affirm the subject but to shock it loose from the comfort and familiarity of bourgeois complacency.

⁸⁹ This is a crucial insight offered by Rosalyn Deutsche. See her chapter “Agoraphobia,” in *Evictions*, 269-327.



Walton Avenue block party for inauguration of *Back to School* mural, Bronx New York, September 3, 1985. (Photo by Ivan Dalla Tana; courtesy Alexander and Bonin Gallery, New York)