

# Inscription & Testimony

Public Art and  
Shared Experiences

by Patricia C. Phillips

In August 1945, the Enola Gay flew over Hiroshima and dropped the first atomic bomb. In a moment, one of Japan's leading commercial cities was devastated. More than 78,000 citizens perished in the blast. Many others died or were permanently scarred by the disabling effects of radiation poisoning. In 1954, the Hiroshima Peace Park and Museum, designed by architect Kenzo Tange, was completed. A major feature of this complex is the Hiroshima Prefecture Promotion Hall. Although severely damaged by the explosion, the 1915 building was one of the few that still stands. All that was left of the prominent dome was its steel skeleton. The structure's calligraphic crown is an inscription of memory—a haunting reminder of the trauma of loss.

In 1998, Krzysztof Wodiczko was awarded the Hiroshima Art Prize. His commissioned public projection created an ephemeral, but indelible project at the base of the Atomic Dome. For two evenings in August 1999, along the stone embankment of the Motoyasu River, Wodiczko amplified the recorded testimonies of survivors and others as

they recalled the personal consequences of this dark moment in human history. As the witnesses' words circulated in the evening air, video projections of their hands, as each individual spoke, were cast along the riverfront. Pairs of hands reflected in the slow-moving waters of the tidal river. Often clasped or at rest, the hands would open, reach, search, and clench in an attempt to define the treacherous boundaries of personal and cultural trauma. Even more than the mutable expressions of a face, hand movements can represent a domain of public grief and private anguish. The projections were both codified gestures and idiosyncratic probes of a partially mapped space of incomprehensible loss. Set before the monumental remains of the Atomic Dome, the spectacle of this 20th-century event conveyed a palpable human dimension.

Public art has many faces. It attempts to satisfy diverse expectations, but it clearly has a role in helping to identify and define absence—what is threatened or lost. Not simply a simulation or recreation, it can excavate and articulate what has been forgotten, obscured, or overlooked so that the past may play a role in shaping the future. Just as history and memory are manifest in multiple ways, public art can be simply an

instant encounter or a lasting and repeated experience; it can have an exceptional range of physical characteristics and formal attributes. The memories or impulses it invokes can be modest or extreme. It rarely functions in isolation: people generally experience it when they are doing something else. It is an aesthetic experience often enhanced by distraction. The Van Alen Report 12 (April 2002) considers the hybrid and often confounding subject of urban design.<sup>1</sup> In addition to looking specifically at issues of design and loss connected to the events of September 11, 2001, editors Andrea Kahn and Margaret Crawford raise more general and equally significant questions that attempt to define this sprawling field. They ask what urban design can do—and not do—in response to sites of crisis or more commonplace circumstances. The published text preceded an April conference on the same subject organized by Kahn and Crawford in conjunction with Harvard University, Columbia University, and the Van Alen Institute. What is urban design? What does it contribute to contemporary life? Who practices urban design? Urban design is a hybrid activity that, as respondent Ute Lehrer said, is “both production

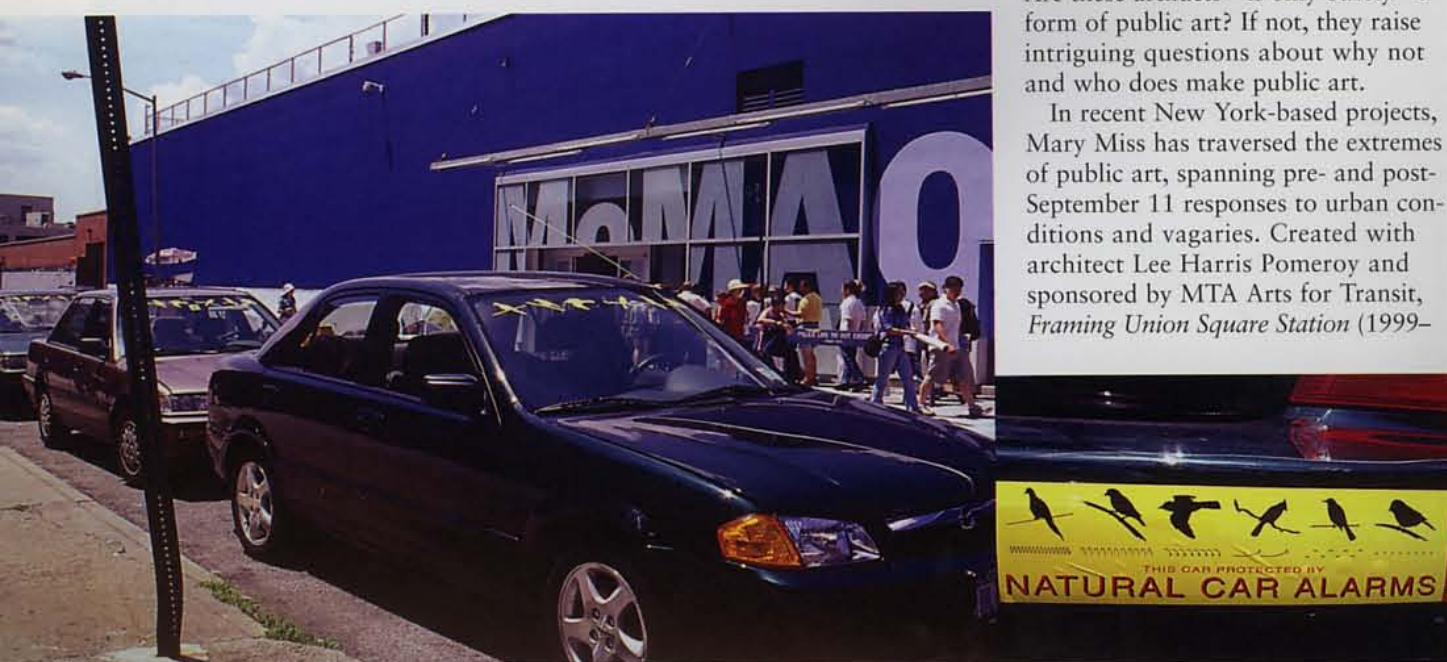
COURTESY OF GALERIE LELONG, NEW YORK



and consumption of urban space."<sup>2</sup> Given public art's own particular "formlessness," these questions and observations have relevance and application. Just what can be reasonably expected from public art? What does it contribute to public life? Who practices public art? In many ways, this last question may be the most salient as a growing number of cities and communities have been sites of deeply felt, spontaneous demonstrations and displays.

It may be helpful to trace some of the edges of contemporary public art. Some work is modest, short-lived, and materially insignificant. With scarcely a presence in the world, the experience—and memory—of the work outlives and extends its physical reality. In contrast, there are projects that share the expansive space and scale of urban design. Although these projects too may ultimately disappear, they are built to be more substantial and enduring. It is a challenge and conundrum to develop critical perspective on a field whose productions can be discarded or swept away on the one hand or must be judiciously collected and conserved without the benefits of museum conditions and protocols on the other hand. Perhaps like urban design, making sense of public art is "like herding cats."<sup>3</sup>

**Below and detail: Nina Katchadourian, *Natural Car Alarms*, 2002. Modified car alarms, sound, cars, bumper stickers, and decals, view of project sponsored by the SculptureCenter.**



Some recent projects suggest the spreading scope of current public art practice. In spring 2001, Nina Katchadourian was a visiting artist at the University of Akron. She developed a project-based pedagogy entitled "Barely Public Art."<sup>4</sup> Working within the conditions of the art building, she asked art students to develop modest, lived-with public art that required a considerable level of curiosity and commitment from participants. In one case, a fascinating, funny, irregular, and restive conversation took place on Post-its in the art building bathrooms. Another group of students offered diagnostic advice on commitment and energy for the arts. Participants were questioned and appropriately colored spectacles were prescribed and issued to mend a deficiency or control a preoccupation.

Katchadourian has done a series of projects in libraries and bookstores in which she rearranges the shelf stock to create little narratives about life, art, and artists. These modest insurgencies are thoughtful reminders of how systems of classification shape meaning and experience. Katchadourian quietly alters and amends normative methods of codifying information to create witty aphorisms or poetic moments. A recent project scheduled at four sites during

summer and fall 2002 deploys the ubiquitous car alarm. *Natural Car Alarms*, sponsored by the Sculpture Center in New York, is described as a "migratory public art project" that descends and alights like a flock of birds on different neighborhoods. As her work demonstrates, often public art is simply a momentary rearrangement of prevailing conventions of shared space.

Aspects of Katchadourian's smart, yet unpretentious work came to mind as I walked the streets of New York over the past nine months. "Barely public art," in contradistinction to its unassuming claims, can have an extraordinary impact on public space and human behavior. Since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, a heteroglossia of images, artifacts, and votive objects has appeared on the city's sidewalks and open spaces. Many objects of seemingly insignificant value have appeared on the streets, fastened to fences or columns, tucked at the bases of buildings, or gathered in parks and squares. Over time, some have been taken away or have disappeared. Now damaged and dirty, others tenaciously, if tenuously, remain. The extreme quantity and explicit simplicity of these very personal amendments (photographs, Xeroxes, stuffed animals, T-shirts) to public spaces reveal how spontaneous activities and accretions can transform the dimensions of shared experience. Are these artifacts—if only barely—a form of public art? If not, they raise intriguing questions about why not and who does make public art.

In recent New York-based projects, Mary Miss has traversed the extremes of public art, spanning pre- and post-September 11 responses to urban conditions and vagaries. Created with architect Lee Harris Pomeroy and sponsored by MTA Arts for Transit, *Framing Union Square Station* (1999–



**Above and detail: Mary Miss, *Framing Union Square Station*, 1999–2000. Painted steel, mirror, and glass, in 125 locations throughout the New York subway station.**

2000) is a subtle and ambitious, expansive and detailed response to this vast, sinewy subway station. Union Square Station often feels unintelligible. Located between 14th and 16th Streets and Broadway and Park Avenue, its multiple entrances lead to an intricate skein of underground passages and levels, which negotiate the arrivals and departures of three busy subway lines. The site is complex, layered, and diffused. There is no obvious or apparent location to place or install art.

Miss chose to deploy a system of more than 125 elements. Red frames or borders were installed throughout the mezzanine and subway platforms to invoke an archaeological investigation and experience of the site. This kind of site is continuously in construction and deconstruction; it is never finished. Changes and renovations create new layers and accretions. The slate is never wiped clean. The past may become hidden or obscured, but it never entirely disappears. Miss strategically

placed the frames to identify points of interest—to actually reveal the fusion of old and new architecture, traditional and synthetic materials. Some highlight historic tiles and mosaics; others actually enable people to peer into the viscera of the subterranean structure. Reflective surfaces and inscribed passages on the interior edges of some frames create an intimate, informative, and vaguely vertiginous experience. And other frames above the tracks serve as apertures that reveal the logic of this capillary-like system. The project is an intelligent response to an unruly site. Each encounter with *Framing*, which embraces the dynamic and mutable characteristics of the place itself, invites new insights and meanings. Vision itself becomes a form of transit.

The events of September 11 have caused many people to re-examine their lives in both small and significant ways. For artists and designers, the tragedy has been a dramatic catalyst to rethink the objectives and strategies of an

aesthetic practice. Like many, Miss has witnessed the spontaneous and temporary tributes and memorials staged throughout the city. Her observations of this incredible public display of individual grief and collective memory have led to two proposals from her studio. One is an open call to artists, designers, landscape architects, and architects to propose temporary memorials for sites in New York. Recognizing that no single memorial can represent the breadth, depth, and complexity of responses to September 11, Miss hopes to stimulate a multiplicity of provisional projects and ideas. Perhaps from these proposals, new concepts or representations of loss, hope, and memory at a civic scale may congeal. *Multiple Memorials* is a call to action, as well as forum to negotiate and navigate the emotional and intellectual residuals of a public trauma.

Seeking a more direct and urgent response, together with landscape architects Victoria Marshall and Elliot Maltby (who have worked in Miss's studio in addition to other creative activities), Miss has developed *Moving Perimeter: A Wreath for Ground Zero*. As a long-time resident of Lower Manhattan, she has observed firsthand the arduous and incremental transformation of the WTC site from a topography of devastation to a prospective space of renewal. The activities surrounding the site are equally compelling. This area of profound loss and extreme labor requires constant orchestration and surveillance in order to manage the clean-up of the site and accommodate and honor the need of





Top and above: Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, *Oculus*, 1999. Installation view and aerial view of floor mosaic in the World Trade Center/Chambers Street/Park Place subway station. Stone, glass, and gold mosaic, 300 pieces, overall work 80 x 1,200 ft.

family members and friends of the deceased, as well as other visitors, to grieve, reflect, and bear witness. *Moving Perimeter* is a continuously mutating project that responds to the volatility, as well as the profound significance, of the WTC site. The project is a kit of parts, including fences and barriers, partitions with receptacles to hold visitors' tributes and flowers, flexible seating, plants, and flowering trees. All of the elements are modular and adjustable. They can be easily reconfigured to the changing patterns of removal and reconstruction of the site. The proposed brilliant blue moat around the site is both a pragmatic and philosophical response to crisis and loss. It can be reconfigured to accommodate the heroic tasks of recovery and rebuilding, but the colorful halo marks a space of vigil—a place of unspeakable loss, reconciliation, healing, and hope.

At this point, the realization of *Moving Perimeter* seems unlikely, but I suspect that it has served to stimulate a more thoughtful consideration of such a transformative place. What do we really know about aesthetic response and reaction to crisis? What are some of the ways to accept and express absence? In addition to observing the activities, displays, and human emotions at the WTC site, the Municipal Art Society is helping to guide a thoughtful, open process that may lead to meaningful strategies. *Imagine New York: Giving Voice to People's Visions* mobilizes a number of outreach activities and strategies to collect people's thoughts and ideas on the future of the site. A number of "People's Visions" workshops were held in New York in spring 2002. There is a Web site, and follow-up town hall meetings are planned. The goal is to include as many voices as possible in preliminary

reconnaissance and to ensure that there is public representation in any deliberations that determine the future of the WTC site. Of course, this is just one of many efforts to guide a process of remembrance and renewal.

As Mabel O. Wilson, James E. Young, and others have suggested, codifying and isolating any single interpretation of a historical moment can never accommodate the variety and complexity of experience and memory.<sup>5</sup> Monuments will—and must—change over time, accepting and relaying new ideas and stories. Perhaps this is why aesthetic responses up to this point have been tentative, temporary, and ethereal. For a month this spring, *Tribute in Light* cast two immense, parallel beams of light high into the evening sky. Conceived and developed by a confederation of artists and designers, including Richard Nash Gould, John Bennett, Gustavo Bonevardi, Julian LaVerdiere, Paul Myoda, and Paul Marantz, and sponsored by the Municipal Art Society and Creative Time, the immaterial presence annealed the shocking absence at the site. Beginning on the six-month anniversary of the terrorist attacks, the nightly illuminations concluded in mid-April, symbolically and finally extinguished by the early morning light of the rising sun.

On September 11, 2002, Creative Time inaugurated a series of "Sonic Projects" in the newly repaired and renovated Winter Garden at Battery Park City. Laurie Anderson, David Byrne, Marina Rosenfeld, and Ben Rubin were asked to create sound pieces for this space. Creative Time underscores that the project, which is scheduled for only two months, is not a memorial. As of this writing, we can only speculate what it will be. Can there be too many memorials? Must all sites of remembrance or renewal be memorials? Are there other forms or typologies? These are significant questions. How and when do we create memorials? When, and why, is another response more appropriate and possibly more unforgettable?

Two other public art projects have resonated since September 11 for different reasons. Staten Island's Fresh Kills Landfill was closed over one year ago. Awarded a Percent for Art commission



in 1989, Mierle Laderman Ukeles may spend the rest of her life working on the transformation of this 2,200-acre site. She will work with architects and, in fact, an entire team to reinstate meaning to a topography formed by everything people have tired of, refused, or rejected. The landfill was reopened to accept debris from the World Trade Center site, which was brought to Fresh Kills to be studied as evidence and sifted for human remains and personal possessions that could be returned to victims' families. In a recent artist statement for an exhibition on Fresh Kills at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, Ukeles writes: "The fact that the debris is being sent to a portion of the closed landfill, to be held and examined as evidence, and then perhaps to remain there, has complicated my attitude about the site in ways that I still do not understand...I want to make this a place, for now, to make room for each other trying—as a community of citizens—to figure out how to understand this site all over again."<sup>6</sup> Fresh Kills has been irrevocably changed.

Miraculously, another public art project was spared. In 1998, Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel completed *Oculus* in the Chambers Street Subway Station of the World Trade Center. A Percent for Art Project, the vast, molecular installation is a re-enactment of the gaze in public space. Using a large-format Polaroid camera, the artists photographed the eyes of hundreds of school children in New York. These

John Bennett, Gustavo Bonevardi, Richard Nash Gould, Julian LaVerdiere, Paul Marantz, and Paul Myoda, *Tribute in Light*, 2002. Light projection over the World Trade Center site, produced by Creative Time and the Municipal Art Society with support from the Battery Park City Authority.

ocular portraits were then transformed into stunning mosaics installed through the network of underground passages. As people rush through the corridors of the station, eyes form a hauntingly beautiful horizon. Drawn to the shimmering colors and details, people often pause to study individual eyes. Others who hurry by have a more cinematic encounter of frame following frame.

Historically, eyes have been endowed with symbolic significance. They are windows to the soul, the center of individual identity. These hundreds of eyes offer challenging information about gender, race, and ethnicity as physical attributes and social constructions. The eyes of New York's children are representations of its vigorous diversity. Clearly, the gaze can be aggressive and intrusive, but *Oculus* sensitively demonstrates that it can also be compassionately connective.

There are the searching hands of Wodiczko's *Hiroshima Project* and the silent eyes of Jones and Ginzel's *Oculus*. As the art and design communities continue to investigate and shape aesthetic

responses to a damaged city and shaken lives, it is important to recognize that the public enactment of memory is long-term process that is often best served by short-term projects. Wodiczko's *Hiroshima Project*, created more than a half century after the atomic bomb, quickened remembrance and renewal through its ethereal presence. And long-term projects too have a particular role and responsibility. As the future work at the Fresh Kills Landfill and the surprisingly enduring *Oculus* demonstrate, neither memory nor meaning is ever fixed or final. A mountainous site of garbage has become a sacred space. The vibrant images of children eyes now bear witness to loss. Perhaps more than ever, we need a vision of public art that is deeply focused and imaginatively flexible. In a world of imminent change and always partial knowledge, public art can open spaces of new perspectives and shared prospects.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Van Alen Report 12. (New York: Van Alen Institute, April 2002).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Artist residency at University of Akron, spring 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Van Alen Report 10. (New York: Van Alen Institute, December 2001), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Artist's statement to accompany the video *Penetration and Transparency*, 2001.