

LAWRENCE ALLOWAY

Ward's Island is a strange landscape. There are views of Manhattan's high urban style across the East River, but in the foreground there are only rank trees and bushes. The colossal piers of the lofty Triborough Bridge stride Piranesi-like across it toward the distant center, and airplanes cross the island on their approach paths to La Guardia Airport. The big institutional buildings of the state's Manhattan Psychiatric Center, oppressive when seen clear, are reasonably subdued by the plentiful shaggy plantings. It is full of areas in suspense, waiting to be used, roads that trail off, traffic barriers that have been in place for years, link fences, fields going to seed: the edge of a city.

The grounds of the Psychiatric Center are covered with outdoor sculpture now: on the river bank, under the bridge, on the site of a razed house, on lawns, among trees. Some of the sculptures close vistas, others are for circling around, some for passing by in corridorlike spaces. The total effect is confusing and encouraging: confusing because the siting and coordination seem to be done on a purely ad hoc basis with no governing plan; encouraging because it reveals that numerous artists are able to work inventively on a large scale. The grounds are open to the public from 10:00 A.M. to sundown seven days a week. To get there, take the M35 bus to Ward's Island from the northwest corner of Lexington and 125th Street, or by car take the Triborough Bridge and follow the signs to Randall's Island and Ward's Island.

I went there on Memorial Day. My only problem was that I could not identify all of the pieces, or even find some of them. The official map is terrible and almost none of the works are labeled. It is hoped that the garden will function as a sculpture library, showing works that can be borrowed or purchased for other sites, such as parks, schools, other hospitals. If it is to work in this way, however, available information must be expanded and improved, not by the Psychiatric Center, which obviously has other things to do, but by the artist organizations. Otherwise, prospective clients will find themselves in my position. There is an interesting wooden sculpture set in the outline of a frame

house which implies greater depth than is actually there. I liked it but could not find it on the guide map and there was no artist's name on it: some library.

Two groups are involved in the outdoor sculpture. Artists Representing Environmental Art (AREA) and the Organization of Independent Artists (O.I.A.), as well as a few unaffiliated artists. AREA, which seems to have come into existence in response to the center's hospitality, concentrates largely on the waterfront facing New York City. New works here include "Hell's Gate Maze," by Carolee Thea, a low-lying ring of wooden pilings and rock, and "Angelipse," by Carl Andre, outlined in bales of straw, both clearly visible across the water from the East River Drive. These are good examples of naturalism of materials, that is to say, the use of materials conformable to the site rather than in contrast to it. The O.I.A. occupies the rest of the grounds with a broad range of works: geometric iron pieces, some painted, some rusted, and wood pieces, some architecturally carpentered (Peter Dudek), others using trees (Arthur Weyhe) and branches (Harriet Feigenbaum). The wooden pieces are often the best: they can be larger in the landscape than expensive metal hardware, but they are also freer of reminiscences of other artists.

Few of the works have been sited as well as Audrey Hemenway's "Bridge Web," a large rigging of steel cables and wooden framework, in which symmetry and dissolving forms pull at each other. It is set very close to the trees on one side of a field, open to the profusion of natural growth; another view shows its tense structure in complicity with the arch of the Triborough Bridge in the distance. Another piece that occupies its site well is Elizabeth Egbert's fanned-out structure of wooden slats that coils into itself and unfurls amply as you circle it. Mary Ann Unger has a rich piece, a 14-foot circle of rounded, slightly tapering forms, each one separate but similar; called "The Well," it suggests a huddle of animals, but the contours are as firm as urns, and though iron, they have the dusty radiance of terra cotta. Another exception to the often desultory placing is a work by Brendon Haugh: he cleared a long band of grass and placed in it a row of fieldstone pieces leading toward the bright blue pier of the footbridge that joins the island to the mainland at 103rd Street. Stones and iron are linked not only by the work's orientation but by the fact that the stones are large in our foreground and the larger bridge is distant, so their perceptual areas collapse into one another.

Who is the audience of the sculpture garden? I doubt that it means much as art to the patients, though the work of installation must be diverting and, as evidence of outside interest in their lives, the show may be reassuring. It may also contribute to the morale of the staff who have a hard job in an isolated place that resembles a prison. The exhibition increases the number of uses of the island and gives artists the chance to work on a large scale for which there are few urban opportunities. It is an imaginative deployment of the extensive, neglected grounds of the center that the director, Dr. Gabriel Koz, has initiated. The center contributes the land and aid from its construction crew; in return, the artists help to socialize the place. Ward's Island has become an impressive addition to the growing network of alternative spaces for the exhibition of art. Most of the works will stay in place at least through November, but in any case it is an ongoing program and can be visited all summer. □