

The exhibition "Art and the Environment" at the Lever House Gallery presents works that AREA (Artists Representing Environmental Arts) has installed in public places throughout New York in the past, as well as works that have been designed for specific sites but never executed. The exhibition consists of models, plans, working drawings, and photographs of the projects *in situ*. AREA (which is not an organization of exhibiting members) has a small board of directors headed by its founder Dorothea Silberman; it provides opportunities for the public to view contemporary works outside of a museum context, and for artists to create works for specific sites. Starting in 1976, with the setting of one sculpture on the shoreline of New York City's East River, AREA subsequently mounted over fifteen exhibitions and presented more than eighty artists.

A major question clarified by this exhibition, which contains works by thirty contemporary artists, is that of the distinction between architecture, sculpture, and environmental art. Light is also shed on the ambiguity of whether many sculptures in outdoor settings can properly be called environmental art, even if they are designed for a specific place.

The introductory historical panel to this exhibition contains references to Stonehenge, the gardens of Versailles, the Ginkaku sand garden in Kyoto, garden mazes, the astronomical monument in New Delhi, Baroque sculpture settings, and the visionary architecture of Boullée. One might have thought that it could just as well have included illusionistic ceilings for Baroque churches, the golden mosaic ambience of a Byzantine church, the "radiance of Chartres" where windows float in darkness, the cave of Lascaux, or the projections of the Hayden Planetarium. But murals or indoor pictorial environments are excluded. One is led to ask why a garden isn't environmental art for the contemporary artist—whether formal and geometric like a French 17th-century garden, contemplative like a Zen sand garden, or manipulated and picturesque like an English park garden by Repton or Brown. And why are the staged musical "events" of Berlioz, the theater of Pirandello, or

the "happenings" of the 1960s not considered legitimately to be environmental art?

Many works here are sculptures suitable for almost any location; even though some of them are intriguing or elegant, to call them environmental art seems questionable. One thinks particularly of the beautiful wind-driven sculptures by Phyllis Mark, the *Rolling Explosion* by Dennis Oppenheim, or Vivienne Thaul Wechter's moving *Leap into Faith*, created to commemorate the Camp David Peace Accord, which, in an edition of three, was installed in Washington, Egypt, and Israel.

However, in examples by Jeffrey Brosk and Athena Tacha, relationships between architecture and environmental art are made evident. Brosk, an architect who employs materials such as bricks, cinder blocks and I-beams, and architectural elements such as stairs, benches and lintels, produces sculpture that differs from architecture only so far as it does not provide shelter; but his work reminds one of other successful attempts to cross the line between architecture and sculpture such as works by Gaudi and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Tacha works with monumental structures defined as memorials but incorporating photographic images which relate them to museum exhibition installations. The vast forms of her projects, however, consist of aggregates of geometric shapes (like crystal formations or geological strata), serial forms which multiply to produce a

sense of infinite scale. They also evoke vestiges of ancient man-made structures, and thus are memorials in another sense, reflecting back on what once was.

The joint project of Penny Kaplan and Carolee Thea (*Ceremonial Conjecture*, an earthwork executed at the Morris Museum of Arts and Sciences in 1981) is related to this concept but is more concerned with modern man's subconscious response to symbols of mother earth, spirals, serpents, and ritual spaces. Art as a communal aspect of creative expression is explored here, rather than art for personal expression or profit. Like the serpent mounds of the Ohio Valley or the Anasazi excavations of New Mexico, this work suggests a time of communal sharing and asks the viewer to make the journey to the center, the voyage of self-discovery.

Of particular interest also are Joe Moss' *Chart*, a steel sculpture intended to focus and intensify the audible environment, like mirrors for sounds; A. Eric Arctander's project for a series of blue tiles installed in New York City's streets and sidewalks to define the original boundaries of New Amsterdam; Tim Watkins' interior environment that reconstructs the visual experience of underwater life; Pam McCormick's floating projects; Christo's surrounded island; and James Wines' projects for SITE.

What, then, is environmental art today, as one might conclude from this exhibition?

There are artists such as Athena Tacha, Penny Kaplan,

Carolee Thea, and Nancy Holt whose interest in prehistoric culture and archaic ritual reflects widespread needs for reassurance and connection that are not met by a science and business culture. This is art conceived as restoring a lost order, a rejection of the idea of scientific progress. It creates expressions of primitive emotions with the artist as priestess or shaman staging an event. There are artists who are attracted to environmental art as ego projection, because of the opportunity to employ large scale, next to which the observer remains passive, not a participant. These artists depend upon shock and incongruity, and the environment is used only as a foil to their imagery. There are some artists who depend upon the changing aspects of an outdoor environment (light, water, wind, sound, traffic) to add interest to their conception. There are some who use the form as a means of self-advertisement through an event, with a hope of sales of souvenirs of the event in the form of drawings or photographs. And there are some whose works are not any of these, but simply large sculptures looking for a parking space with the greatest exposure.

Judging from this exhibition, one must conclude that the modern artist considers environmental art to be almost any form of public art not exhibited in a museum, leaving the term undefinable in any strict sense. However, in their most evocative forms, they define or demarcate a special place, and are intended to reestablish a lost sense of communality and of wonder. (Lever House, February 20-March 10)

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## ART AND THE ENVIRONMENT



Penny Kaplan and Carolee Thea, *Ceremonial Conjecture*, 1981. Earthwork. Executed at the Morris Museum of Arts and Sciences, Morristown, New Jersey.

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