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By Carolee Thea

Since 1990 Mary Jane Jacob has worked as an independent curator, organizing programs that test the boundaries of public space and the relationship of contemporary art to audiences. These include the site-specific exhibition "Places with a Past" (Charleston, 1991); "Culture in Action" (Chicago, 1993); "Points of Entry" (Pittsburgh, 1996); and "Conversations at the Castle" (Atlanta, 1996). Jacob has served as Consulting Curator for the Fabric Workshop and Museum, and at the invitation of the Spoleto Festival USA (2002-04) she conceived and developed the "Evoking History" program. In its third phase, "Ask Large Questions of Small Places," Jacob, together with artists Rick Lowe and Suzanne Lacy and architect Robert Miller of Clemson Architecture Center-Charleston, focuses on the only two original houses remaining in African American hands in the portside gentrification in downtown historic Charleston. While this location is slated for future parking, Jacob views it as a means to advance a larger cultural narrative about race, education and employment equity, land development, and historic representation. Over the next two years, her team will undertake an advocacy process-as-art program, working with artists, architects, and historians to envision meaningful alternatives to the redevelopment. Jacob teaches at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is a member of the graduate faculty at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, New York.

Carolee Thea: New forms of art-making in the 1960s and '70s—Minimalism, performance, feminism, constructed painting, and earthworks—moved outside of the museum into the public realm—not in the prevailing tradition of public art but as an instrument to reflect on institutional elitism. Is it in this locus that your curatorial work began?

Mary Jane Jacob: While art in the public sphere has been with us since the beginning of time, there's something particular that grew out of the period you cite and that has flourished in the past two decades, making it a gravitational point for many critical issues. With this came an expansion of form and context, moving practices outside of the museum, and in doing so, engaging the audience as part of the creation and meaning of the work.

CT: You began your career in museums as a curator of modern art, but as a graduate student you had an internship with the Michigan Arts Council and this is where your career was truly formed.

MJJ: I curated a project called the Michigan Artrain, truly "art for the people." A six-car train traveling the country showed works from each selected arena. While we could critique that practice for being in only one location a week, the preparation in each community was for a year. The community proudly paraded through the train with a spirit of accessibility and acknowledgment of value, that is, to share art with others. This is really the attitude that has interested me in essential and long-lasting ways.

CT: As an art history student you could have easily followed the path into museums and worked within conventions. What was your impetus?

MJJ: I became interested in investigating how the experience I had, "naturally," growing up in New York, could exist in other places. In New York, museums were commonplace and accessible— museums didn't seem elitist until I traveled around the country and found out there weren't museums like that everywhere.

CT: The idea of a train moving through the country showing art was an intriguing move.

MJJ: It was one way of having a temporary museum. There were other ways of sharing and

recognizing culture and part of it was acknowledging what was already there—not importing art, but looking at the culture and resources of a specific place. This continued with my interest in hybrid, open attitudes of art-making: like with feminism, for example, to understand different ways of making art whose political action and social agenda circumscribed the prior definition of art. This also made me think about the audience for contemporary art, along with lifestyles, everyday experiences—ways in which art was not alien to people but was a matter of perception of our own lives, our culture and history.

CT: You could say this presaged contemporary and global issues of art-making, encompassing cultural narrative. In many biennials today, art from once peripheral communities is challenging the dominant Western vocabulary.

MJJ: It is about listening to what people say about places and values that have often been submerged for generations. Preconceptions about art are ingrained because we don't allow people without an art degree or professional position to say something of importance about art and experience. My democracy is about the audience. Visiting the train gave the audience a moment to reflect about art. Now, like then, I'm just bringing art to people, which may add to a place for a time. Whereas in the beginning I worked to introduce and give equal respect to certain women and regional artists, my agenda has enlarged today.

CT: The acknowledgment of diasporic and nomadic populations in the United States has influenced the present multicultural and global dialogue.

MJJ: In the past decade, cultural awareness has greatly changed, and diverse artists and subjects have arisen like never before. But where we haven't changed is in thinking about who the audience is and who can have a valid art experience. We are still in large part talking to ourselves or stratifying our experience as professionals, people with art degrees, with money, those from privileged social and economic circumstances. My involvement in public art really begins in 1990 when I left museums to work in partnership with artists on projects conceived for certain locations. Here I found an embracing discourse in public art, which moves from the monument/historical formula or contemporary masterpiece such as an Oldenburg or Calder toward installation or process...

CT: and experiential....

MJJ: Yes, about expanding the discourse of public art—not simply expanding genres: an installation versus object or temporary versus permanent. Going outside the museum you have the possibility of encountering a more diverse audience interaction. At Spoleto and in all my projects, it is about working with artists as well as audience to share and reflect on our practice in which we collectively participate.

CT: The work is an occasion for dialogue—to look at place differently—not to change the world but simply to think about things differently.

MJJ: The discursive nature of the projects I initiate is important to me. The best art exists on a private, solitary level as well as a communal level. That communal level can be articulated literally, existing in silence for a moment on a public street perhaps. Different from a museum, it can catapult us to a dialogue that steps beyond just what the art object is about. This is what public art allows us to do when we think about the public as much as the art.

CT: Do you always carry on your practice within an institutional framework?

MJJ: Yes, one that is solely directed to programming potential—reshaping around the audience and the artist's work—while making the institution as mutable as possible. We're not trying to funnel art and ideas and audience experiences through a prescribed physical space or avenues. In our work in Charleston, we undertake standard educational practices and programming—but the goal is more like reuniting a neighborhood through the living manifestation of an artist's idea that would otherwise look solely symbolic, aesthetic, or contrived. We want things to be multiple—aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, and activated. Lewis Hyde's writings about the trickster inspire me. In his recent book *Trickster Makes This World* (1998), he writes about the trickster as a living legend while speaking as a cultural critic. Hyde refers to the artist as trickster—someone who can be mischievous and through his/her antics and studied scholarly approach can work the "joints" of society. If our joints don't have fluid to move we can't be malleable—we can't react, and we're going to break. Today, the artist

plays with the joints, he says. I encourage artists to do this. I like to think a curator can be a trickster too.

CT: Many industrialized cities have become the dinosaurs of the 19th and 20th centuries, the buildings and people once engaged in a vital industrial economy are finding other routes to rejuvenation, mainly through tourism. Bilbao invited the Guggenheim to build a museum, and, in other places, biennials are instituted to this end. Is this the motivation for the Spoleto festival in Charleston as well?

MJJ: Charleston lay fallow for 100 years after the Civil War. It started to come back in the late 1960s and was given a real boost in 1977 when Gian Carlo Menotti brought the Spoleto Festival from Italy to Charleston. And, yes, it was part of a revival effort to encourage tourism and other engagements. We're doing with the visual arts program today, however, is tied more to residents than bringing in tourism—we are benefiting from our own history. With a strong cultural base we have informed the community, which gives us the latitude in the art to be more investigatory and innovative.

CT: Given Charleston's specific economy, geography, history of slavery, and the contemporary society of blacks and whites, how do you feel it could be a model for other communities?

MJJ: I do think there are lessons learned in these projects, ones that can inform how we proceed in our work collectively. As a curatorial body we are not just keepers of collections, we are inventing processes to bring about works and exhibitions as a public art program. When I began working in Charleston for a show in 1991, called "Places with a Past," I thought it wildly expansive to work outside the museum—connecting everyday sites to individuals in the community and creating projects made specifically for them. There were 18 installations by 23 artists, all in historic indoor or outdoor sites, but I walked away from that exhibition the same way I would walk away from any that I had installed in a museum or gallery. I don't think that I was fully aware of what I'd ventured into. I didn't realize until years later that the opening was a place/time to begin a dialogue—not just as an exhibition—and once that dialogue began, it would not end. Six years later when I was invited back, I thought I could only duplicate the previous approach. However, when I finally chose to go back, inaugurating a new program—"Evoking History"—in 2001, on the 10 year anniversary of the first show, I met many people who told me about the works in extraordinary detail that they had seen a decade earlier.

CT: Who were some of the artists in that show?

MJJ: It ranged from well-known artists such as Christian Boltanski, Chris Burden, and Antony Gormley to younger, emerging ones such as Ann Hamilton, Elizabeth Newman, and David Hammons.

CT: Did other models, for instance Skulptur Projekte in Munster in 1987, inform your work?

MJJ: Yes. In Munster 1987, site-specific works such as Rebecca Horn's, which were rooted in the history of a location, attracted great art world interest and brought local residents who had an informed entry point closer to the work (they were the experts not the art historians). In Spoleto, "Places with a Past" dealt with historic places as not being hermetically sealed. History is our past and our present and in experiencing this place, through the art, we see the vitality of these subjects today. Whether it's due to the public's own association with the Spoleto Festival as high art or one's own history or tradition, I found a great openness to contemporary art and artists. The public isn't frightened away from this form of art, and through it they encounter their own lives.

CT: One of the mandates following the decline of the National Endowment for the Arts in the U.S. is to educate our people about the value of art.

MJJ: We have studies and proof of the economic development value of contemporary art from a real estate and tourism point of view. I think mainstream American society has a hang-up with art because it doesn't appear productive and useful and doesn't fit in a capital model. What we're trying to do is identify other aspects of the use value of art, spiritually, aesthetically, socially, and economically. One of our root questions in the dialogue here is "Why does art matter?" not just showing what art can be, in some cases some wild and crazy stuff. How does it have resonance and relevance? This is how we define whether we've done a job that matters. And we want to move the discourse of public practice, which has been stuck during the past decade in vexing issues, such as "What is value of the outsider to the insider?" by

really challenging definitions that place us on either side of such boundary lines.

CT: Another issue, which solidified in new genre public art practice, is multiculturalism.

MJJ: "Who can speak for whom?" was one of the dictates that came out of this practice in the '90s. You had to be black or Latino to speak for a black or Latino community. I hope we're moving to a new place that is not an essentialist discussion and where art can be a nexus for a wider dialogue. If we can't work across such social boundaries within the presentation, production, and discussion of art, then we have no hope in actual life.

CT: In speaking of historic sites, I can't help but think about monuments, memories embedded in concrete or bronze, public resting places in which the actual memory is lost. But your projects are active.

MJJ: I think one of the reasons that public art changed in the last 15 years or so and felt the need to expand is that traditional monuments were seen as dead objects that had no meaning for us—the patina obscured their relevance. What's different about the works we have done in Charleston is that our works are sited in a city that is itself a living monument to a history of slavery. In 2001, a temporary collective, led by the writer Neill Bogan and composed of nine local artists, architects, and poets, debated the nature of monuments and their manipulation for six months, denying recognition to some communities and histories, especially where designation of people and place would get in the way of real estate investments. This played a formative role in the evolution leading to "Memory of Water" and "Memory of Land," the Spoleto project for 2002.

CT: In this case then, the memorial is an action instead of an object.

MJJ: We're not working on memorials about people, ideas, or events that are dead and over, but with living monuments to commemorate ideas and actions that continue in the present. Barbara KirshenblattGimblett, one of our national stakeholders, drew on Pierre Nora's distinction between *milieux de memoire*—where a connection to the past is perpetuated by the institutions of family and church, by a communal way of life in which memory plays a vital part—and *lieux de memoire*—which stand in the place of memory, such as in the conventional monument—the man on a horse type of thing. Although in transition, Charleston still has a huge *milieux de memoire*, an environment of evidence, that we're trying to tap in our work. These are the living monuments, and our mission is to deal with and confront memory as important to future change. When we began in 2000, the Spoleto Festival USA General Director Nigel Redden suggested that we create monuments to the Middle Passage, even temporary or impossible ones. He was thinking in expanded and unobstructed ways, but we could not have imagined where it ended up, that is, with "monuments" of a vital form which reflect on the city and its people as a living monument. We found that what we associated as a monument was something symbolic of memory, but now we could have living memory—and these monuments had to take another form, one that is more vital.

Charleston is permeated with memory—living memory in the people, in the land, and it is carried by water. These are its "monuments" to the past. So, as we have known them, "monuments" aren't needed in Charleston. But works of contemporary art that can articulate the living presence of memory and its manifold meanings—they can work the joints of that society and of our national condition, which finds its way back to the story of American slavery born there.