



Summer Surprised Us

John Haber
in New York City

Summer Sculpture 2005

When summer begins, all of New York becomes gorgeously exposed to the elements. Between the long sunlit evenings and the relative dearth of natives, I like to feel that I can have it all to myself. I look especially forward to sculpture outdoors in so many city parks, as an excuse to explore far, far beyond Chelsea's artificial lights and new-media darkness.

For 2005, one truly has to start exploring, for **Manhattan itself** slips too readily into a summer haze. Fortunately, one can head out for a first encounter with Governors Island, where "**Set and Drift**" steers a course between nautical metaphor and the former military installation's place in history. On more familiar ground, artists are playing rough in Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, with "**Sport**," or lolling in Empire Fulton-Ferry State Park, with "**Rapture**"—the year's round of sculpture "Between the Bridges" in Brooklyn. In a review four years later, I return to Governors Island for its next installment, "**PLOT/09**."

Monuments to summer

Not that **public sculpture** and Manhattan's subways and streets stand totally at odds. Much as with 2004 **New York architecture** exhibitions or the photographs of **Marc Yankus**, several simply take those settings indoors, including a retrospective of the inventor of "**nonsites**" himself, **Robert Smithson**, and a pungent alternative to

The New York Earth Room by **Mike Bouchet**. In the parks, however, a sleepy caution rules the day slip. With his spare means and often complex, modular designs, **Sol LeWitt** continues to challenge even now, at least on the wall. Outdoors, however, he seems to be deliberately playing with one's very associations between the sculptural and the monumental, and the latter wins out all too easily.



In one work, cinder-block pillars rise up from a low, circular enclosure set in Madison Square. A second guides the cinder-blocks elements into a long, slowly rippling wall. The play between cool, gray, naturally flat components and gentle curves repeats the **Sol LeWitt** conundrum of the given and the emergent, the conceptual and the visual, the modular and the organic. It also shows intelligence when, in heading outdoors, **Sol LeWitt** turns from materials closely associated with drawing to the look of a construction site. Still, the foundations without architecture sit awfully still. His rising globs of bright color on the Met's summertime hardly roof show him at his best either.

City Hall played it safer than ever, with **Julian Opie**. The Londoner, nearing fifty, either empties his closets or attempts a career retrospective, depending on how eager one feels for the latter. Schematic cars, sheep, and skyscrapers lie here and there in thin, painted wood. Cartoons grow static as his striding LED man and women flank the Tweed courthouse.

Jim Hodges, working outside the Ritz-Carlton Hotel just northwest of Battery Park, sits uneasily between Opie's playful stock of images and LeWitt's curving monumentalism. Hodges covers a nine-ton reflecting wall, shaped like an S on its side, with irregular fields of black and white. He means *Look and See* to reflect its surroundings and to dismember those reflections. In practice, I might have been seeing a Matisse cutout, but with dancers replaced by bunny rabbits. If that sounds promising, like by reinventions of sculptural tradition by **Claes Oldenburg**, the matte surfaces and simple images quickly bring the dance and the laughter to a stop. Dancers, rabbits, curves, reflections, memories of lower Manhattan, and New York in the summer alike should have more get up and go.

As in 2004, **Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller** create their unique blend of audio tour, memoir, fantasy, and illusion. *Her Long Black Hair* returns by popular demand. The appearance this winter of *The Gates* may make their version of Central Park seem more claustrophobic than ever. And back downtown, local and national politics threatened to ban art and memory entirely from the public spaces of Ground Zero.

The trick, as so often, is to leave Manhattan—or, surprisingly, even what city natives may recognize as home. Among the pleasures of seeking summer art outdoors, one gets to reacquaint oneself with New York. Old neighborhoods and familiar sights become fresher, and all at once their layered history takes on visual form. One gets to expand one's very map of the town, exploring new parks and new neighborhoods. One may well find an oasis from it instead.

Catch my drift?

Governors Island offers that rare chance to experience all these in a summer afternoon or even in a single moment, for the \$6 cost of a ferry ride (free in subsequent years, it should be said). It has strikingly up-close views of downtown, the Brooklyn waterfront, the bridges that link them, and the harbor beyond, with the Statue of Liberty reassuringly at hand. It has a very visible history, starting with the early nineteenth century fort occupying high ground near the ferry landing. It has the strangeness of an entire island that has lain empty since the Coast Guard gave it up and President Clinton sold it to New York for \$1, and plans remain uncertain or unarticulated. This summer it has art as well.

One surely feels history the most, for each of the six artists in "Set and Drift" is seeing ghosts. **Anna Craycroft** begins with ghosted glass, tracing period furniture on the windows of an empty house that no one can enter. Also along the once-elegant Colonels Row, where the officers lived during the **Civil War**, Jesse Bercowetz and Matt Bua call their ramshackle addition *The Last House to the Left*, both for its location and its hint that nothing further will stand. Their cramped, awkward shed holds memorabilia scavenged from the island, audio and visual—when I visited, including someone's rambling associations with the Grateful Dead. **neuroTransmitter** provides another kind of audio tour, with a tree-house radio station that amplifies both ambient sound and Daniela Fabricius's narration, while Leo Villareal defines absences simply by outlining the shore each night with LEDs. Across from those, Jennifer Zackin adds one last farewell, signifying the notes of *Taps* by the color and height of ropes along a row of trees.

One can easily dream up further elegies of one's own. A circuit of the island brings one from structures nearly two hundred years old, past the ostentatiously crisp and grand Leggett Hall, designed in the early twentieth century by McKim, White, and Mead, and beyond. To the south, well over half the island holds a different kind of testimony to local history, built on ground excavated in constructing the subways. Now cordoned off and sternly guarded, it once stood as a community in itself, complete with a school, a bowling alley, and, I have heard, a BurgerKing. After discharge from the service, my father's generation used to go to the island for duty-free shopping. And as if to compress every one of these layers, the old fort surrounds only modern quarters that would not look out of place in a motel.

If only the exhibition could evoke more of this rather than just set and drift. Part of the problem stems from the art near invisibility. Had I forgotten the obvious simplicity of *Taps*, the overwhelming presence of lights across New York on any given evening, or their silence during the day? Those colored ropes and LEDs make it all too clear. That radio transmission would sound overly didactic on the History Channel, and the shed seems more like a dorm in need of straightening up than a compression of time since the Civil War. It seems even less like the recycled communities in art now by [Phoebe Washburn](#) and others.

Then, too, the island itself refuses to bow to the sadness of a departing bugle call or ghosted glass. On a weekend afternoon, all those guards, park rangers, volunteers from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, and no doubt artists actually outnumbered visitors, but they helped create a critical mass. One could feel perfectly at home among them, not to mention among so many picnickers and strollers.

The work that does succeed puts the past on a collision course with the viewer. Serge Spitzer's *Thousand Islands* burrows into the tunnels of the old fort and seriously ratchets up the volume. On opposing walls of a narrow chamber, men and women, stripped down for beach weather, pelt away at each other. A few women wear the only hint of local history, tops patterned on the American flag. As they swim in and out of focus and in and out of slow motion, they seem covered in welts and blood, although I have read that the actually video records a ritual in Spain involving tomatoes—and no jokes, please, about thousand island dressing. It resembles a remake of *24 Hour Party People* by Mel Gibson, but if one chooses to take offense, all the better, and one could always return to the sun and the majestic view over the water.

Sporting chances

Summer weekends on Governors Island, the isle is full of voices—mostly low and soothing ones at that. Will one even hear them **next year**? Socrates Sculpture Park, in contrast, fairly bustles with activity. Yet for all its **Long Island City neighbors**, its exhibitions have to compete with a sometimes disturbing silence.

Astoria residents willing to trek down Broadway to the waterfront can watch movies, attend a "sport video night," or to drop in on the **Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum** only a block away. Living sculptors use the park as their studio, and work by **Mark di Suvero**, a founder, looms behind a fence, just as during the earliest **summer shows there**. Yet somehow the raw signs of work in progress only accentuate the park's disheveled appearance, from its uneven surfaces, worn grass, and stark fences to the housing projects, hospitals, and old Roosevelt Island lighthouse looming across the water. Perhaps the curators prefer the irony of a park with rough edges. Last summer's show, on the theme of "Field," had some nasty parodies of suburban lawns, and this year the contestants tackle "Sport." One might call them bad sports indeed.

Right at the entrance one passes under Collier Schorr's billboard, *Reaching*. The athlete, seen from behind, could just as well be stretching, fainting, praying, or collapsing for

good. Other competitors have lost and departed long ago. Alix Lambert's massive cement boxing ring appears at first to contain only an empty cement stool and a broken pipe, but the latter has the shape and color of golden gloves now fallen to the floor. Orange and yellow tubes stretch across Tony Fair's decrepit lawn chairs, patterned after the outlines of a ball field but more closely resembling giant worms that, no doubt, swallowed the last who dared to relax here. Artists known only as Type A deposit what appear to be oversized chest protectors or hockey masks in fragments on a hillside, leaving visitors feeling very much type B. Apparently, not even Jason can survive this exhibition intact.

Other works represent less icons of the game than of one's own sports experience, and that, too, means only memories of failure and strain. Anne Thulin leaves three partially deflated, red vinyl balls, each six feet in diameter, like every childhood dream that ended lost amid the trees, and the struggle carries on into adulthood as well. If those thirty-five-pound weights would look manageable in a gym, and the thought of moving the stack gave me the shivers. Lee Walton has purchased them on the Upper East Side and carried them, one by one on foot, probably not while chirping "The Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge Song." Ron Baron provides a *Monument to the Weekend Warrior*, but do not leave a wreath too soon. Its imposing, square-based cement column, with the texture and color of caked mud, traps the sodden remains of more sports equipment than I shall admit ever to have owned.

Perhaps the viewer has long since settled for the role of a fan, but the crowd here fares little better than the participants. I imagine it in the fuzzy blobs on Nicholas Arbatsky's billboard, unless those represent the squished remains of whoever attempted his gigantic boardslide. Allison Wiese's "solar audio flag pole" broadcasts its mysterious sporting news to nowhere at all, while Peter Simensky's metal stands stare each other down in silence. Would their close abutment become any less disturbing if park visitors managed to fill them? Satch Hoyt's transparent soccer goal does supply cheering voices, but the soccer balls themselves lie mired in a plastic heap.

I could tell you which of these installations worked for me, but a critic is, after all, only a Monday morning quarterback. Budding athletes will just have to take their own chances on the park's ragged turf. Meanwhile, I am going out for a long and painful jog.

Water under the bridge

One last entry into New York's outdoor sculpture also looks to summer lawns and the harbor. I felt that I had settled into this year's version of "Between the Bridges," as soon as I saw Micajah Bienvenu's *Reclining Nude*. Its single loop of silvery metal looks back to modernist elegance, but it fits as well with the sunbathers sharing Empire Fulton-Ferry State Park.



Even with over twenty works, the show hardly interrupts those magnificent views of the lawn, bridges, and lower Manhattan, in part because it has room to spill north, beside an adjacent playground. With a title like "Rapture," no doubt it aims for just that intensification of relaxation and pleasure. Karen Kang, too, echoes tradition, in an open assemblage of reeds, sculpted stone,

and wire screens hanging loosely as fabric. Its materials come straight out of Noguchi himself, but *Surround Within* displaces his garden ideal into an actual hillock. Others who try to merge art, nature, and a city park include Matthew Weber, whose tree rings

form a topographic landscape. One might overlook entirely Courtney King's bed of mushrooms, growing almost naturally in the shadow of real trees.

Artists returning from previous years appear happy to lower the volume. Nicolae Golici's tubular construction tapers just once in the middle, like an hourglass on its side or, perhaps, yet another reclining nude. With his miniature rooftop of white wood and glistening black, Roger Stevens makes me think less about frightening changes in the skyline than of a New Yorker's nostalgia for water towers and tar beach. Ursula Clark, who has helped organize these shows for the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition, makes even Kafka's existential crises less fearsome. *Metamorphosis* resembles a gigantic insect, but its body of straw fits easily into the nearby grass and compost, and its broken leg does not so much heighten one's empathy for Gregor Samsa's agonies as hobble a predator. I did not care much for Richard Brachman's dog in its miniature kennel, but at least it is not about to hurt anyone.

Others address local context more directly, but for itself rather than as a lingering symbol of terror. Joe Chirchirilla's birch branches taper off into something like rooftop antennas, and Nancy Neinberg's translucent doorframe and unfixed metal knob lie in the grass, as if one of Dumbo's new co-op conversions were taking a vacation. Katherine Simpson places fragments of a pier over by the park's edge furthest from the water. Something must have torn its dark metal and ragged concrete violently away, but I accepted them as having drifted gradually on their own, like my own unmoored moorings.

Some artists do get political, although largely without success. Carlo Vialu's *We Will Be Greeted with Flowers* would work if the sarcasm sounded less pat—and if one had an easier time deciphering the image in the bed of flowers, an M-16. Others push the show's easygoing tone to the cutes, like the arches of milk cartons and giant feet or Cecilia Lueza's girl dancing in bright orange tights. On the harsher but brighter side, I especially liked *Weapons/Lives* by Margaret Roleke, its stark red lettering on a white background riddled by apparent bullet holes. The holes cluster at dead center of the words "Weapons of Mass Destruction." Something, its simplicity and title suggest, has shot to pieces both the sign's message and actual lives.

Mostly, however, the show departs from a conscious meditation on the view across the waters. That thought characterized "Between the Bridges" in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Eventually, however, I guess art and Ground Zero will just have to accept one another. Ali Naschke-Messing sums it up with his collection of Buddhist prayer flags, although I admit I found the installation a bit banal visually. One flag reads, in part, "Please help me to be old myself." It seems to call not so much for a physical restoration as for an acceptance of change and a recovery of the self within.



jhaber@haberarts.com

"Building, Cars, and People" by Julian Opie ran through October 15, 2001, in City Hall Park, Janet Cardiff's "audio walk" through September 11 beginning at Sixth Avenue and Central Park South, "Set and Drift" through August 13, 2005, on Governors Island, thanks to the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, "Sport" also through August 13 in Socrates Sculpture Park, and "Rapture" through October 7 in Empire Fulton-Ferry State Park in Dumbo, thanks to the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition. Sol LeWitt's sculpture remains on view in Madison Square Park through the year's end.

