full life
socrates sculpture park
Sculpture by
Elsa Ariamny
Joanne Brookley
Jean Clareboudt
Keith Haring
Bruce Johnson
Don Porcaro
Guy Scocy
Richard Stankiewicz
Eve Sussman
Mark di Suvero

Painting by
Anthe Zacharias

Photography by
Pierre Piatier

7 June 1992 - 2 May 1993
Socrates Sculpture Park
by Hubert Blomberg

Ever since the constructivist upheaval at the turn of the century freed it to be made of rough materials placed in space, sculpture has become, for the most part, the fruit of a radical attitude and of an uncompromising act. It left behind the solemnity of the figurative referent for the physical and expressive power of matter and space in perpetual interaction. In this way, sculpture began to act in direct contact with the real world, in a dialog with architecture, defying the norms of balance and weight, and putting into play a concentrated and expansive energy.

The history of this appropriation of the real is punctuated by well-known milestones. With the cubists and constructivists, sculpture incorporated the true nature of materials which lent it their distinctive formal, sensory and physical particularities. With Duchamp, it adopted existing commonplace forms and made them its own. Then, thanks to Schwitters, sculpture was able to recuperate its materials from the debris of the real world. Freed from all subterfuge, sculpture could now shape itself within the realm of daily life and draw new aesthetic criteria from it. Since David Smith, the economy of the work corresponds very precisely to the nature of the way it is made. The succeeding generation — Tony Smith, Richard Stankiewicz, Mark di Suvero, John Chamberlain — revolutionized even more the practice of sculpture by freeing it from the stylistic laws of the modernist form, opening the way to non-form, to anti-form, to minimalism, to arte poverta... This eruption into the real, this collusion with the concrete, obviously brings up the question of sculpture's destiny: the relationship it will maintain with the landscape in the large sense of the term, and its capacity to establish itself in the reality of a vital context.

When considering a few of the artists who defined recent sculptural history, one can only be struck by the geophysical grandeur of the spaces in which they chose to live and work: one need only think of the studios of Bolton Landing (David Smith), of Saché (Alexander Calder), or of Taalman (Robert Jacobsen). The true nature of sculptural work demands these strong confrontations with the landscape, be it natural, industrial or urban.

And one can deplore the fact that too often the spaces chosen for sculpture deny it this force, reducing it to a decorative function — on the plaza in front of a bank or in one of those "European" parks whose spirit and organization too often evoke the garden of a petit marquis. (But Louisiana (OK), Kroeller-Mueller (NL) or Storm King Art Center (USA) are there to prove that superb exceptions do exist.)

Socrates Sculpture Park seems so exemplary because, by the nature of its project and of its site, it responds directly to this new dimension of sculpture.

It achieves this for several reasons: the lay-out of the space, opening onto the water of the East River and the most famous architectural ensemble on the planet; the grandeur, the strength and roughness of an industrial past; and finally and above all, the human factor of a population constantly confronted with the harsh difficulties of life. What meaning could we give to any art that avoids the essential reality of life?

Establishing a project such as Socrates Sculpture Park required that particular mental and physical energy that artists, and perhaps more specifically, sculptors possess. The original idea was born of altruism — to help young artists, by means of the Athena Foundation, to carry out a project. And, several years later, after careful reflection about the relationship between public sculpture and the difficult life of this Long Island City neighborhood, Socrates Sculpture Park took the formidable gamble of reclaiming from the industrial wasteland these spaces devoted to art that make up the premises of Spacetime, Mark di Suvero's studio and the Oil and Steel Gallery, and of making them totally neglected riverbanks livable once again.

The nature of this enterprise is clearly infused with the spirit that inspires all of this kind of art: a spirit of pioneering pragmatism that knows how to draw its intellectual and artistic strength from the grandeur of the landscape, and from the brutal energy of the materials and their construction, without distancing them from the human scale, and without ever losing sight of a true solidarity and vital interdependence.

One anecdote springs to mind which underscores this idea of harmony between a sculptor's act and the bold venture of Socrates Sculpture Park, wrenching from the surrounding industrial wasteland. This anecdote — too good not to become legendary — comes from Richard Stankiewicz, who found the principle of his art while he was digging up the old scrap iron from a courtyard, hoping to unearth the original garden: "The spade began hitting old hunks of metal which I tossed against the building... I sat down to catch my breath and my glance happened to fall on the rusty iron things lying here I had thrown them in the slanting sunlight at the base of the wall. I felt with a real shock — not of fear but of recognition — that they were staring at me. Their sense of presence, of life, was almost overpowering. I knew instantly what I had to do. I bought a welding outfit, mask and gloves and a do-it-yourself book: How to Become a Welder in Your Spare Time. My first sculpture was finished in a day.

How can one not also be reminded of the spirit of Mark di Suvero's first pieces, when, by defying all the laws of weight and gravity, he reinvented balance and imbalance, joining together raw elements of demolition, throwing pell-mell construction beams, trash items, barrels, and ladders into his sculptures until that first monumental piece ("Yes! For Lady Day") where the enormous cylinder of a locomotive's boiler was suspended in the air? Finally, how can one not hear again on these riverbanks the raspy voice of Albert Ayler, whose body was found in the river one morning in 1970? He too
had tried to recycle the most worn-out popular refrains into a new and
generous kind of music, grating with irony and bursting with hope, music
that still today energizes our heritage with a potent force. It is still this kind
of energy that drives the group at Spacetime; it is still this pioneering
spirit of the 60’s and 70’s that animates Socrates Sculpture Park,
at each new season and at each new creative confrontation.

One of the most significant steps in the history of Socrates Sculpture Park
is the one that, after reflection and architectural projects, led to the
decision not to arrange the works in the Park in a definitive way, but rather
to keep the Park’s character open and changing, to let it shape itself to
the will of each new artistic intervention.

In this way, the Park takes care not to impose the fixed severity of an
institutional setting on the sculptor or the visitor.

The evolving character of the space is also respected by the fact that
Socrates Sculpture Park does not conclusively fix how long each
work will be shown there, as is usually done between permanent
installations and temporary exhibits. Instead, the works are installed in
the Park and interact with each other according to more natural rhythms;
some pieces stay there several years, others are more ephemeral.
This coexistence is more supple, more open, and allows interesting
confrontations to take place over time.

In this way, many encounters take place: between the people who work
there all year and the invited artists, between the visitors and the
neighborhood residents who are regularly invited to the festivities for
new installations, but also, over time, between several generations of
artists, of diverse nationalities and artistic tendencies. These various
encounters have helped establish a regenerative dialogue between
young artists and those more experienced, sometimes between the
living and the dead, outside of all museum conventions, outside the
standard boundaries of an art history that is too quickly categorical and
confining. Generations don’t really succeed each other, they overlap.
It is the task of individuals’ lives to disrupt the linearity of time. Each new
wave does not erase the previous one’s work. Each time, the wave
simply disturbs our certitudes a little more.

At this end of summer 1992, two rust-colored silhouettes, stark vertical
and austere, seem to respond to each other with the same open and
controlled simplicity: Richard
Stankiewicz’s “73, #4,” a piece
composed of simple cylinders,
only structured, and with a
rigorously formal economy, and Mark
di Suvero’s “Runi,” of a similar
masterful austerity, erected near the
water, open angled, vertical, with
steel beams, balanced just at the
limit of the center of gravity.

In his studio, di Suvero was finishing
“Lao Tzu,” which is formally much
more complex and topped with a
mobile element. It should be placed
in the Park in several days, after
long months of slow maturing.

And under the high roof of Oil and
Steel, all the way at the top of its
support, hangs the great steel curve
of “Yoga” in a simple balance.
In the adjoining room, Pierre Pliathers
was showing a series of black and
white photographs, which revealed a
keen and tender view of New York
City. In the riverbank bay between
the studios and the Park, Eve
Sussman floated a wood and nylon
structure, simultaneously primitive
and wise, in an extremely precarious
position, like some vessel fallen from
the skis.

At the other end of the Park, in front
of the large iron container painted by
Anthe Zacharias. Don Pocaro
perched a strange concrete craft,
teeming with reeds and herbs, on
high wooden stilts.

And even more exotic still, Joanne
Brookeley was dismantling the last
casings of a cement terrace: gaudily
colored, furnished with baroque
metal parasols and seats, feasible
for music, a joyous podium encircled
by a zigzagging line in a fluid
metallic hand.

The anthropomorphic piece of Keith
Haring’s dancers contrasted sharply
with the other works: with Guy
Scoby’s very rhythmic, very airy
piece mounted in a shower of sparks;
with Bruce Johnson’s powerfully
classic wooden tree that played on
the material’s natural beauty,
reorganizing the vital power of plant
life and that of an artifact; and with
Elisa Anzany’s paradox of steel
blocks tumbling like a house of
cards. Haring’s dancers, in brightly-
colored lacquered aluminum,
exuberant and straight out of the
world of comics and graffiti, were
symptomatic of the visible and tragic
bouquet of the AIDS generation.

Finally, Jean Clareboudt used a
chain saw to make a highly
constructed sculpture, a dynamic
rupture of overlapping wooden
beams and iron girders, entitled
“Central Square 1.” This piece was
a new step in his series of horizontal
pieces, called “risings,” begun
several years earlier in Australia, and
continued in Denmark and France.

He was supposed to install the
hanging “Central Square 2,” a
symmetrically opposed figure on the
other side of the glove, in Calcutta,
two weeks after the Long Island City
inauguration. Socrates Sculpture
Park played a determining role in
this crucial passage between these
topographically well-known points,
marked and named by the artist in a
nomadic geography.

It is in this state of open-mindedness
and mobility that one should grasp
the meaning that underlies both the
defining act of sculpture and the
human enterprise which creates this
place that welcomes the work and
lets it be seen.

And undoubtedly, we touch there the
meaning of the distinction that
Richard Nonas establishes between
the notion of space and the notion
of place, which he defines as a
specific space emotionally qualified
by man. And undoubtedly we are
there, as close as possible to what
he calls the “civic” dimension of art.

(1) Cited by Pontus Hjulien. Preface to
the catalogue of Richard
Stankiewicz: Mayor Gallery. London.

Translated by Jane McDonald
elisa arimany
The Strength of an Idea
Steel
16" x 11 5/8" x 16"
5.45 x 3.50 x 4.90m
1992
joanne brockley
Untitled
Steel, Concrete, Plastic, Paint
12'2" x 4'10" x 28'4"
3.71 x 1.52 x 8.64m
1992
Jean Clareboudt
Central Square
Wood, Steel, Concrete
3'6" x 13'9" x 16'10"
1.54 x 4.20 x 5.13
1992
keith haring
Untitled
Painted Aluminum
10' x 13' x 12' 5"
3.47 x 4 x 3.80m
1989
bruce johnson

Big Bang
Redwood, Copper
19' x 19' x 19'
5.79 x 5.79 x 5.79m
1992
don porcaro

Untitled
Wood, Concrete, Steel
15' x 8' x 3'5"
4.60 x 2.43 x 1.04m
1992
guy scohy
Oh Sophocles!
Steel, Paint
19' 10" x 7' 2" x 5' 11"
6.04 x 2.18 x 1.8m
1992
Richard Stankiewicz
1973, #4
Steel
61" x 50" x 48"
152 x 127 x 120cm
(courtesy Zabriskie Gallery)
eve sussman
Schmuller
Wood, Nylon
14" x 14"
427 x 427 cm
1992
Mark di Suvero
Lao Tzu
Steel
296" x 165" x 365"
8.99 x 5 x 11m
1992
anthe zacharias

Untitled
Acrylic enamel
6' x 40'
2.4 x 12m
1992
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