“1992 ¡The Americas!?”

A COLLABORATIVE PUBLIC ART PROJECT

In 1990, four organizations — the Bronx Council on the Arts, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, and Socrates Sculpture Park — all dedicated to bringing new art to the broadest possible audiences, joined together to create a pilot project to explore ideas of art, history and identity in relationship to the Columbus quincentennial celebrations of 1992.

Three factors motivated this collaborative project:

The creation of thematic and curatorial cohesion among four organizations with different curatorial approaches and methods, and with very different venues;

The possibility of combining fundraising and marketing approaches and sharing in the results;

And finally, the creation of a series of exhibitions, diverse in style, cohesive in theme, which would foster dialogue on the questions of public art among citizens and professionals alike.

The four exhibitions, separately, and as a collaborative event, though dissimilar in form and materials, pointed out the many visions and values of public art.

At Woodlawn Cemetery, the Bronx Council on the Arts, under the curatorship of Betti Sue Hertz and Fred Wilson, installed an exhibition entitled “Houses of Spirits/Memories of Ancestors.” Nine artists created pieces reflecting the iconic nature of the site with its implications of mortality and immortality. By reaching into the past, the artists recovered personal and historical memories in response to this contemplative site.

The streets of lower Manhattan became the site for REPOhistory’s Sign Project. Under the aegis of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, the artists’ collective REPOhistory positioned 39 historical markers throughout the tip of Manhattan. The markers did not celebrate the traditional events associated with that area, but rather the forgotten people, moments and places — the slave market, the first Chinatown, the paupers’ jail — that do not fit easily into conventional versions of our history.

Socrates Sculpture Park, a riverside site in Queens under the curatorship of Enrico Martignoni, became the venue for an exploration of where public art is heading. Five artists created pieces pointing to the future, to internationalism and a recombination of the many forms of large-scale public sculpture.

Staten Island’s Snug Harbor Cultural Center mounted an exhibition entitled “Silhouettes of the Southwest.” Under the curatorship of Olivia Georgia, seven artists looked at the myths and icons of the Southwest. They created new works which combined the clichés — adventurism, conquest and heroic existence bound to nature, animals and a rugged landscape — with contemporary realities.

The four exhibitions, in four boroughs of New York, responded to their unique sites with thoughtful, often witty pieces which shared ideas about history, exploration, legacies and the future with their own communities, as well as with those art lovers who ventured under rivers and over bridges to sample the other aspects of this project.

This catalogue, with its four separate parts, will serve as a document for this innovative and successful collaboration between four such distinct arts organizations from such different parts of the city.

The sponsoring organizations of “1992 ¡The Americas!” received generous support for this pilot project from the Cowles Charitable Trust, Philip Morris Companies Inc., the New York Community Trust and the Plimsook Fund.
Socrates Sculpture Park would like to thank the many people whose energy and resources allow it to flourish. This exhibition could not have been realized without the help of:

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All photographs: Pierre Plattier
Nomadic people made objects and worked with space. Later groups developed styles of toolmaking and dwellings conditioned by the environment, the materials and game available. In this dynamic we find the origins of art making in the Americas. The intervening centuries have brought severe climatic and cultural changes to these continents. Art making, millennia later, is more rarified than ever. Infrequently do we find commonalities and universalities—the bonds which connect us—as the key to the work.

Individualism, a much vaunted characteristic of the United States, has permeated cultural life—unsurprisingly. Combined with a commodity-driven society, this compels artists to incorporate qualities which differentiate "this year's model" from last. What have become of the bowls, scrapers, deities, and games of the Americas? Mimbres to Tupperware? Mayan ballcourts to Shea Stadium? Macchu Picchu to Levittown?

Contemporary sculpture reflects waves of migration to and from the Americas, the movement of people and ideas. The Spanish colonization was the most dramatic intervention into the cultural life of the Americas. More recently, the synthesis of Asian and North American styles or the adoption of minimalism among European sculptors continues this fertilization.
Socrates Sculpture Park was begun in 1986. It occupies five acres of waterfront in western Queens, which at the time, was being used as an illegal dumpsite. The vision of Mark di Suvero and the efforts of hundreds have created a park dedicated to large-scale outdoor sculpture—sculpture in the scale of life. Exhibitions are chosen by a group of artists and people associated with the project. The works are primarily made at the Park using the facilities at hand and the pieces remain on view for as long as a year.

With the Manhattan skyline as a backdrop, Socrates presents a special challenge to sculptors. Artists are selected from as international a group as possible, one way of continuing the dynamics of sculpture in the Americas. In this exhibition there is Guy Scohoy, a Belgian-American working in the vein of David Smith and Richard Stankiewicz, pioneering steel sculptors. Elisa Arimany-Brossa, from Barcelona, continues in a minimalist tradition, as in the work of Robert Morris or Susanna Solano, which has proven vital to sculptors worldwide. Eve Sussman returned from the canals of Berlin to New York and floated in the East River an outsized schnuller, a German form of an infant’s pacifier.

Bruce Johnson has taken a century-old redwood tree, up-ended its trunk and, with a nod to the Park’s neighbor, Isamu Noguchi, put finely hammered ends of copper on its limbs. ‘Wind Gamelan’ changes the tempo of the visitor who strolls to the waterfront. Bill and Mary Buchen bring back to
the United States some of the many sounds and techniques
they collect on their travels—this, a little bit of Bali in New
York.

Emilio Cruz, has suspended the carcass of a car at twenty
feet. One can see the skyline beneath it, a tableau of life in
New York if not the United States and the Americas. 'Cargo
Cult for Lewis Mumford' talks about the conditions of our
lives; the sculpture is as ambitious and provocative as the
writings of Mumford. New York City, graffiti and Keith
Haring became synonymous in the 1980's. His piece, comic
as it is, represents the "dream of the melting pot." In these
times, when it is essential to maintain optimism about the
future, Haring's blue, red and yellow dancing people embody
that uniquely American myth.

Enrico Martignoni
'Untitled (Three Dancing Figures)' 1989

Painted aluminum
305 x 366 x 549 cm
120 x 144 x 216 in

Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery
"Big Bang"
1992
Redwood and copper
548 x 518 x 565 cm
216 x 204 x 222 in
'The Strength of an Idea'

1992
Steel
545 x 348 x 485 cm
198 x 137 x 191 in
"Oh Sophocles!"

1992
Painted Steel
645 x 218 x 180 cm
238 x 86 x 71 in
'Cargo Cult for Lewis Mumford
A.K.A. Resurrection of Dry Bones,
and the Union of Two Sticks'

1991
Wood, Steel, Slate, + Bones
921 x 737 x 591 cm
335 x 268 x 215 in
'Schnuller'

1992
Wood and Nylon
462 x 462 x 462 cm
168 x 168 x 168 in
"Wind Gamelan"

1991
Aluminum, Plastic and Stainless Steel Woks
540 x 180 x 120 cm
216 x 72 x 48 in