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ARTFORUM

John Miller, *Untitled (March 20, 2020),* ink-jet print, 6 1⁄2 × 9". Tony Rosenthal, *5 in 1,* 1973–74.

ON SITE

CROSSED PATHS

Alex Kitnick on the public art of Lower Manhattan

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THE MUSEUEMS ARE CLOSED but the sculptures are still there. Memorials and monuments, too. If you're in Lower Manhattan, you can ramble along the Irish Hunger Memorial's serpentine path, a rugged simulacrum of peat and stone. I've never been to Ireland, but I take it that parts of it look like this. The strangeness of the work is its location in Battery Park City, where since 2002 it has sat like a souvenir between corporate towers, with the Hudson River stretching out to the west. Robert Smithson called certain of his sculptures "nonsites" to denote their difference from the sites whence they came: A pile of shale in a steel trough in the middle of a gallery stood as a nonsite to a quarry somewhere off in New Jersey. The Irish Hunger Memorial has always struck me as a massive nonsite, a memory displaced and brought over from elsewhere, now made even stranger since the host site is no longer what it was.

An eastward walk takes you to Federal Plaza, where Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* once stood. For most of the 1980s (I never saw it in person), the sculpture cut a steely line across the cobbled space, casting stark shadows, collecting graffiti and pee. Many office workers didn't like it because it obstructed the building's entrance, but certain judges looked out the window and saw a threat—a cover for bomb throwers or a simple sign of menace. In 1985, a trial was held, a verdict declared. Testifying on Serra's behalf, the sociologist Joel Kovel argued, "Serra's work . . . represents the

space of this plaza as divided instead of homogenized." It revealed "the true oppositions in our society which bureaucracies work to deny." Has anything changed since? One night in March 1989, *Tilted Arc* absconded in the dark. (The Berlin Wall took its first kicks in November of that year.) No one has figured out what to do with Federal Plaza: During the '90s, the city tore up the pavers and installed curlicues of shrubs and benches, but for some reason the design didn't stick. Today, there's an odd array of marble pedestals and platforms, Noguchis cut off at the knees, and crescents of plantings. It's no success: No one is there, but then, no one ever gathered there anyway. In 2000, the New York–based artist Tom Burr—a keen observer of Smithson—erected a facsimile of Serra's arc in Braunschweig, Germany. (Later it appeared in Lausanne, Swizerland; Des Moines; and New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, when it was still on Madison Avenue.) Burr's version is wooden, diminutive, and deep purple. Serra had declared that to remove the work was to destroy it, but Burr intimated that good arcs, set at the right tilt, might provide protection wherever they go.

After the *Tilted Arc* controversy, many artists refused to believe that public art could contest conventional uses of public space—maybe they never believed that it could in the first place. At the same time, public art was everywhere, especially downtown. Ned Smyth made *Upper Room*, 1987, in the newly constructed Battery Park City—a residential real-estate development built on landfill and festooned with art—just a short walk north from where the Irish Hunger Memorial would later stand. Named after the chamber where Christ enjoyed his last meal, Smyth's sculpture is,

strangely, a secular affair: Crafted from bluestone and red mosaic, it evokes a plein air movie palace; but instead of a screen, there's a large table for checkers and chess. “This public art makes Battery Park City seem substantial, responsive and human,” Michael Brenson wrote in the *New York Times* in April 1989. “As a result, the art promotes those developing and selling the site.” While I appreciate the eccentricity of Smyth's work—it sits flamboyantly, invitingly, at the end of Albany Street—it possesses the unmistakable quality of an amenity, something desirable, usable, just so. A wine cave aboveground: It makes the abstraction of finance feel comforting and concrete.

In 2016, the artist John Miller made a short Power-Point “film” called *Reconstructing a Public Sphere*, which turns on a series of photographs shot around Battery Park City. (Both the Irish Hunger Memorial and Smyth's sculpture make appearances.) The work focuses on the transformation of the neighborhood after 9/11 and on the way art and security have worked in tandem to fortify it. It also details Miller's own history with the area: He lived there when the planes hit, then moved away. I watched the work a number of times on my laptop before I understood that Miller meant *reconstructing* sardonically—I still thought the public sphere had some hope for redemption. (I guess I still do.) Miller zooms in on the barricades occupying the area, which he calls “unconscious public sculpture,” reasoning that people accept them as “the price that must be paid for freedom.” Sometime in March, soon after Covid-19 blanketed New York, Miller sent me an email. He had just returned from his new daily walk: “Went by Tony Rosenthal's *5 in 1*, which the cops are now using as a

kind of storage corner for their ubiquitous barricades. Tomorrow that should become a midday photo: dueling forms and modalities of public sculpture." A late-modern trifle from 1973–74, Rosenthal's conglomeration of five peeling red disks—one for each borough—has been put to work by the police. Decades ago, Cady Noland found the stuff of discipline in the telos of modernism, creating specific objects from chains, flags, and pillories. After all these years, life still imitates art.

John Miller, *Reconstructing a Public Sphere,* 2016, Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, 10 minutes 26 seconds. Ned Smyth, *The Upper Room,* 1987.

So what will become of public art and space in New York in the months and years ahead? More baubles and police barricades? Some claim that the

truly public art of our time is not that which demands people come to it (the puppy in the plaza) but that which disperses outward to meet its audience—the magazine, the hit single, the post. I guess that's true to a certain extent, but now, more and more, that seems like our experience of so much art, especially during quarantine. (Were we sheltering in place while out and about?) The Situationists liked to remind us that underneath the cobblestones lay the beach, that below civilization's fortifications waits a natural beauty ready to break out. Such radical wistfulness may feel newly relevant these days—and it's important to remember that in 1982 artist Agnes Denes planted a two-acre wheat field on the landfill where Battery Park City now stands and in doing so offered a pointedly contrarian conception of culture. (She considered the plot a "waste," a confrontation, a potlatch-like expenditure of real estate.) But planting in the city now mostly consists of microgreens on condo roofs, and so art must change too. It has to work with the steel already in place. This month, the great sculptor Melvin Edwards, best known for his series "Lynch Fragments," 1963–2016, is set to install oversize broken chains around New York's antebellum city hall, thematizing modernism as a constant struggle for liberation—indeed, a constant struggle for representation—rather than a fait accompli. Pulling the language of abstraction into the realm of the real, and thus offering an implicit rebuke to art's claims for autonomy, it will be something to see, to look at, and to contemplate—an insistence on the public sphere as necessarily agonistic. Art might provide materials for a barricade or two; it might mark a place to gather (consider Rosenthal's other folly, *Alamo*, 1967, in Astor Place, or Mark di Suvero's *Joie de Vivre*, 1998, in Zuccotti Park); but more and more I'm convinced that art doesn't do things. Rather,

it points to what people might do. Art is like Smithson's nonsite; it points back at life. Typically, we take public art for granted (like anything else, it gets absorbed into our daily routines), but as we reenter the city, there may be a brief moment when we'll see it again—its potentials and pitfalls alike—and decide what path we want to follow.

— *Alex Kitnick*