

Art in America

A School for Sculpture

The Neuberger Museum's newly inaugurated Biennial of Public Art has brought 27 widely varied works to the 500-acre SUNY Purchase campus.

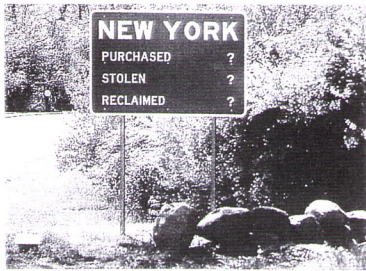
As a big-city-style institution plunked down on the suburban campus of Purchase College, State University of New York, the Neuberger Museum has always exhibited a certain schizophrenia. The condition may even extend to the whole of SUNY Purchase—this is, after all, a college in a resolutely bucolic setting with a mandate to train students in art forms which tend to thrive best in an urban environment.

This disparity provided the backdrop for the Neuberger's first Biennial Exhibition of Public Art, which opened May 11 and continues through Oct. 26. The show was organized by Neuberger curator Judy Collischan, who called upon a group of eight nominators and a seven-member selection committee, drawn from both inside and outside the campus community, to choose the 27 participating artists or artist teams. Making a selection by committee, as opposed to putting the choice in the hands of one or two curators, may help explain why the inaugural Neuberger Biennial takes no position on the debates currently raging in public art. What the show offers, instead, is an eclectic sculptural invasion ranging over the university's neatly tended grounds. Works nestle on open lawns, in wooded groves, over brick walkways and, in a few cases, within campus buildings.

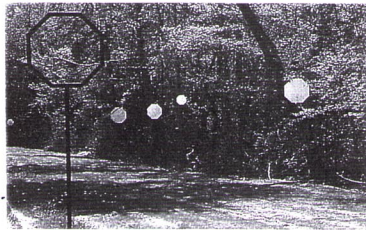
One of the first projects visitors encounter is Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzler's *Stop*, a set of deconstructed traffic signs installed along the main road leading into the campus. Planted close to the road is a series of black steel signposts, each of which is surmounted by an empty eight-sided black frame. Attached to a line of trees some feet back from the road is a second series of signs in the form of gilded octagons. Glinting in the sun by day and picking up the flash of car headlights at night, these golden stop signs serve to alert visitors that something unexpected lies ahead. For his contribution, Edgar Heap of Birds adopted a related strategy with a faux highway sign which engages Native American issues by questioning the ownership of New York State. "Purchased? Stolen? Reclaimed?," the punning white and green notice reads.

Visitors must secure a map indicating the locations of various sculptural works within the campus's 500-acre grounds. Many of the most successful pieces are those placed in the wooded areas, where they are able to play off the dichotomy between nature and culture. Michael Singer's work, *Retellings: Scholar Garden*, is sited in a sylvan grove well off the road. The artist enclosed an existing boulder and a smaller adjacent rock with a pair of low-walled clay and wood structures. Seen from the winding path that leads to the piece, Singer's work bears suggestive resemblance to an ancient burial site or a ruined temple.

Also hidden in the woods and seemingly ancient is Renée Stout's *Oguz's Bed*. Placed alongside a stand of white birches on the site of an old tennis court, the



Edgar Heap of Birds: *Reclaim*, 1997, steel highway sign, 104 by 72 by 2 1/2 inches.



Kristin Jones & Andrew Ginzler: *Stop*, 1997, steel sign frames, mixed mediums. Courtesy T2/Art & Co., New York. Works this page were sited alongside West Road near the SUNY Purchase campus entrance. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Judy Collischan.

work consists of a rusted bedspring interlaced with small rusting tools and metal objects. Twigs and stones surround the bedspring, giving it the appearance of an artifact slowly returning to nature. The Yoruban deity Oguz, patron of iron and other metals, to whom the work pays homage, is also the subject of a sculpture by Mel Edwards permanently sited elsewhere on campus.

A number of other works also establish a dialogue with the natural setting. Lurking at the edge of a clearing is an assembly of sinister, asphalt-covered figures by Ronald Gonzalez titled *Tunnels*. Perched atop a cement boulder amidst an expanse of green grass is Donna Dennis's *Cataract Cabin*, a remarkably detailed miniature beach house. The presence of a tiny boat in the grass helps reinforce the illusion of a seaside hideaway. Also on a green lawn is *1500%*, Willie Cole's huge sculpture of an upright steam iron. Constructed out of old tires and a weather-beaten sailboat hull, the oversized iron stands alongside an iron-shaped scorch mark in the grass.

Away from the natural settings, things become more problematic. A number of works are sited on or beside a long, sweeping brick walkway between two rows of campus buildings. While for the most part admirable in themselves, few of these pieces seem even remotely responsive to their surroundings. A biomorphic sculpture in aluminum by Louise Bourgeois (*In and Out #2*), a massive bronze by William Tucker (*Vishnu*), a curving copper screen encoded with cryptic lettering by Jim Sanborn (*Kryptos*) and an enormous beaker and drain assembly by Ann Messner (*Amniotic Sea*) could just as well have been installed inside as outside.

An exception is Vito Acconci's *Park Up a Building* for an exterior wall of the Performing Arts Center. Because of transportation problems its installation was delayed. But even in the absence of the work, detailed drawings and fasteners already attached to the designated wall suggested that Acconci's plan to "plant" a stand of trees horizontally from the wall will go a long way toward alleviating, at least temporarily, the arid blankness of the campus's brutal modernist architecture.

Only a few artists ventured inside. In a piece titled *Berries*, Ming Fay accentuated the vivid hues of blue and green which distinguish the corridors leading to the Pepsico Theater and the recital hall in the Performing Arts Center by hanging clusters of giant paper maché-and-metal berries from the ceiling. In the college library, Dennis Adams's *Waka* offers an instance of public art as institutional critique, a genre little represented in this exhibition. On the underside of a small-scale model of the campus, Adams has installed a large lightbox photograph of the 1965 Watts riot. This image of inner-city violence, which is reflected in a large mirror on the floor, not only suggests the urban antithesis to SUNY Purchase's idyllic suburban setting, but it raises the issue of whether the fortresslike architecture of the campus was partly a response to the student unrest of the Vietnam War era.

In the end, while the Biennial offers a variety of delights, it does nothing to clear up the question: Is public art anything more than simply sculpture placed in a public space? And if it is, what might that be? This lack of a conceptual framework may explain one of the more surprising lapses in the exhibition: the failure of artists (with the possible exception of Acconci, whose work was originally designed for another setting, and Adams) to deal either critically or restoratively with the coldly dehumanizing architecture of the SUNY Purchase campus.

Despite these shortcomings, the Neuberger Biennial is an experiment which seems well worth continuing. A visitation of sculpture will be an ideal way to keep the peaceful Purchase campus and its museum more closely tied to the riotous confusion of the outside world. □

The Neuberger Museum of Art's 1997 Biennial Exhibition of Public Art is on view through Oct. 26.

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