

Metronome

by Robert C. Morgan

Commissioned by The Related Companies for a new building on the south side of 14th Street across from historic Union Square in Manhattan, *Metronome*, by Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzl, has caused something of a stir in the neighborhood. It is unlikely that this recently installed public artwork will be removed or vandalized (as was the case with Serra's *Tilted Arc*), but it has been a catalyst for the expression of some highly charged emotions, some bewilderment, and, of course, the usual cynicism. This is not to imply that the response to *Metronome* is entirely negative. Some have welcomed it as a genuine contribution to the Union Square area, a neighborhood still undergoing major redevelopment. After more than 18 months of construction, *Metronome's* official inauguration occurred on October 26, 1999.

Metronome consists of 12 elements, ranging from The Vortex to The Phases. It is clear that Jones and Ginzl knew exactly how to use the building's façade to their advantage. The central portion of the work is an undulating vortex constructed with 52,000 bricks in 29 panels. The Vortex rises nearly 100 feet, beginning at the second story just above the storefront windows below, and measures approximately 53 feet wide. Near the top of The Vortex is a circular aperture called The Infinity, which regularly emits steam in geyser-like eruptions at noon and again at midnight. Other elements include a six-by-three-foot bronze cast of the hand of George Washington, appropriated from the famous equestrian statue (1857) by Henry Kirke Brown, which faces south (toward *Metronome*) from its centrally located plinth in Union Square.



The Vortex panel also includes lights that comb the surface at regular intervals, a large reinforced concrete and fiberglass rock, and a bronze tapered cone extending between the rock and The Infinity, from which the steam is emitted. In addition, there is an elaborate L.E.D. clock off to the left side of The Vortex, composed of 15 panels, which measures 62 feet horizontally. The digits count the hours, minutes, seconds, and milliseconds of the day beginning at midnight. To the right of The Vortex are The Phases. They are represented as a sphere, covered half in gold and half in black, which moves according to the rotation of the earth, thus exhibiting the phases of the moon. The complex relation of parts (elements) to the whole may seem staggering, but somehow *Metronome* coheres visually as an ensemble in relation to a rather unappealing tripartite architectural façade.

The building itself appears nearly devoid of design. I believe it was Lewis Mumford who once made the distinction between buildings and architecture. This committee-driven construction project barely qualifies as a building. It is a megalithic monstrosity of diverse incoherent components and includes a multiplex cinema, an enormous Virgin megastore, a branch of Circuit City, another storefront on the southeast corner (that has been vacant





Opposite and this page: Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, *Metronome* (four views), 1999. Brick, concrete, steel, aluminum, bronze, gold, incandescent light, steam, L.E.D. display, and sound, 98 x 200 ft. overall.

since the building opened), all capped off with one of the ugliest condominium complexes anywhere in New York. It is a miracle that Jones and Ginzel could actually pull off a work that has considerable elegance, even grace. The public detractors are more than likely angry with the appearance of the building rather than with the presence of the art; but because *Metronome* appears less pragmatic, it bears the onus.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether *Metronome* is less pragmatic than other utilitarian aspects of the building. After all, it does tell the time. Not only does it give the exact time of day in the most literal sense, it also extends the concept of time into geology and astronomy; in essence, it projects time from what is literal to that which is metaphysical—time beyond measure. According to a statement published by the artists: "The elements suggest the instant and infinity, astronomical sequence, geological epoch and ephemerality... Ultimately, the work is an ode to mortality and the impossibility of knowing time."

Jones and Ginzel are not new to the scene. They have been working together on symbolically charged, elegantly conceived trans-sensory installations for nearly two decades. They are known for making works that are maximal in content, which often rely on complex mystical ideas referring to alchemical propositions about space and time. *Metronome* is one of their most recent attempts to make this happen outdoors in a crowded urban environment.

Metronome is basically a frontal installation with a strong allegiance to pictoriality. Stylistically, one might consider it a cross between Constructivism



and kinetic art, but with the signature style for which Jones and Ginzel are known. Again, the tendency toward mysticism seems evident, although the written proposal for the work plays this down in favor of a clean description of the technical apparatus and the materials. Jones and Ginzel are, by now, experts in shaping these kinds of proposals.

Metronome invites comparison with Ann Hamilton's installation last summer in the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, which sounded good on paper but missed something in its execution. Both works were expensive; therefore, the demands on the artists to produce a seamless document—with a strong record of institutional support—was necessary and important. It is difficult to make a qualitative judgment about *Metronome*, given the circumstances of the architecture on which it resides. In the case of Hamilton, she had the budget to alter the American Pavilion according to her needs. On the other hand, Jones and Ginzel were, more or less, stuck with what they got. At least *Metronome* functions successfully as a comprehensive design project, whereas Hamilton's Venice project is simply a failed installation.

One concluding remark: is *Metronome* post-modern? This is not an inappropriate question. In spite of its metaphysical connotations, I think it is. There is a suspension of oppositions, yet the imposition of the resolution comes more in terms of design and less in the content of the work. The content of the work remains an open proposition full of narrative conjugations and possibilities. The text suggests that there is a resolution within the metaphysical structure of the work, but then that text has to compete with the real life context. Herein lies the problem, but, to the benefit of Jones and Ginzel, herein also lies a profound question, a sociological/aesthetic question: how does public art make its point amid the excess of information compressed into a congested urban space? This is one of the most interesting ruminations—indeed, one of the pleasures—in deciphering the code of *Metronome*.

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