



Interviews with:

Vito Acconci

John Ahearn

David Avalos

Denise Scott Brown

Rufus L. Chaney

Mel Chin

Douglas Crimp

Paulo Freire

Andrew Ginzel

Linnea Glatt

Louis Hock

Ron Jensen

Kristin Jones

Maya Lin

Rick Lowe

Jackie McLean

Frank Moore

Jagoda Przybylak

Assata Shakur

Michael Singer

Elizabeth Sisco

Arthur Symes

Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Robert Venturi

Krzysztof Wodiczko

Dialogues in Public Art

Tom Finkelpearl

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By the 1990s, public art had evolved far beyond the lonely monument on an open plaza. Now public artists might design the entire plaza, create an event to alter the social dynamics of an urban environment, or help to reconstruct a neighborhood. Dialogues in Public Art presents a rich blend of interviews with the people who create and experience public art—from an artist who mounted three bronze sculptures in the South Bronx to the bureaucrat who led the fight to have them removed; from an artist who describes his work as a “cancer” on architecture to a pair of architects who might agree with him; from an artist who formed a coalition to convert twenty-two derelict row houses into an art center/community revitalization project to a young woman who got her life back on track while living in one of the converted houses.

The twenty interviews are divided into four parts: Controversies in Public Art, Experiments in Public Art as Architecture and Urban Planning, Dialogues on Dialogue-Based Public Art Projects, and Public Art for Public Health. Tom Finkelpearl’s introductory essay provides a concise overview of changing attitudes toward the city as the site of public art.

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Dialogues in Public Art

By: Tom Finkelpearl

Selected Quotes:

Introduction: The City as Site

“Each of the artists interviews in this book is deeply involved in creating space or time for interconnection and dialogue, in the rather optimistic attempt to reorient the city of fragmentation and separation.... Avalos, Hock and Sisco, Ahearn, Ukeles, Jones and Ginzel, and Wodiczko create ongoing opportunities for dialogue, often in collaboration with their audiences”(pp, 45).

Chapter III: Five Dialogues on Dialogue-Based Public Art Projects

“In the introduction, I discussed the development of battery Park City. At the north end of the development is a New York City public school, Stuyvesant High School. Stuyvesant was founded in 1908 and operated on the same site on the east side of Manhattan until moving to Battery Park City in 1992. Under New York’s Percent for Art law, the school was required to spend 1 percent of the construction costs on permanent public art, and Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel were awarded the commission. In Paulo Freire’s educational technique, prospective educators first spend a great deal of time in the community, develop their educational materials in dialogue with the community, and create a mechanism for ongoing dialogue. Without any direct knowledge of Freire (as far as I know), Jones and Ginzel created a very Freirian project – spending time at the old Stuyvesant High School, creating a project with thousands of current and former students, and making an on-going project for the numbers of the school community over an eighty-eight year period into the future.

One of my great regrets is that I was not able to complete this book before Paulo Freire passed away. I would have loved to discuss it with him, to hear his criticism. Freire was inspiring in his openness, his ability to listen to criticism, and to continue to move forward intellectually. He insisted that education, learning, and social change were a process, not a goal. This emphasis on process is also evident in the projects in this section” (pp, 273 – 4).



***Interview: Kristin Jones and
Andrew Ginzel on Mnemonics***

Introduction

Kristin Jones (born 1956) and Andrew Ginzel (born 1954) have been collaborating on site-specific installations and public artworks since 1985. For many years, their work was characterized by subtly designed kinetic environments. They did not make “machine art,” but landscapes that used motion, along with materials drawn from nature like sand, water, and fire. Their first permanent public commission was a Percent for Art commission at the Portland, Oregon, Convention Center, completed in 1990. Since that time they have worked on a series of commissions in both the private and public sectors, along with a smaller number of gallery shows. At the time of publication of this book, they are completing a huge project for a residential building at Park Avenue and Fourteenth Street in New York City. The multimillion dollar project includes a massive terracotta wall and a variety of timekeeping devices from digital to lunar. Also in 1999, they installed a permanent work called *Oculus* in the World Trade Center stop of New York City’s subway system. The work is executed in mosaic and consists of scores of eyes based on photographs the artists took of a wide range of New Yorkers. The work discussed here is *Mnemonics*, a permanent work commissioned by Battery Park City Authority, the New York City Board of Education, and New York’s Percent for Art Program. Completed in 1992, it is installed throughout Stuyvesant High School in Lower Manhattan. In this interview, Jones and Ginzel discuss the structure of the project and how it came to be. With extensive participation from current and past Stuyvesant High School students and others, Jones and Ginzel created artworks within four hundred hollow glass bricks placed randomly in walls throughout the school. Wherever you walk in the ten-story space, you see at least three or four of their blocks: over drinking fountains, in glass brick or masonry walls, along the run of the numerous escalators.

Stuyvesant High School was founded in 1908, and it is a selective public school. Any student who passes the entrance examination can attend the school regardless of where they live in New York City. (Many people feel that it is no mistake that this exclusive public school became a part of the exclusive public space of Battery Park City.) Given the challenge of working in this environment, the artists chose to create a project that would include the history of Stuyvesant High School, as well as a reminder that the world exists outside of the city, the state, the country.

The blocks are divided into three groups. The first group consists of a block for each of the eighty-eight classes that had graduated from Stuyvesant. The blocks



Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, Oculus, 1998, throughout the World Trade Center Subway Station, New York, New York. Commissioned by the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Arts for Transit.

are filled with memorabilia: photographs and objects that chronicle the school's history and the history of American culture. Each block was sandblasted from within with the appropriate year. Another eighty-eight blocks were left empty, again with a date sandblasted from within. For eighty-eight years (starting in 1992), each graduating class will have the opportunity to open the appropriately dated glass brick and place significant objects within it before permanently resealing it. The third set of blocks, around 230 in number, contain objects from around the world. These were obtained through an ambitious mailing campaign—contacting embassies and consulates around the globe and scores more of people, most of whom had never heard of Stuyvesant High School, participated in this aspect of the project. The three sets of blocks are mixed randomly. Walking through the school you see objects, empty blocks, and historical blocks in a variety of sequences—so you are encouraged to think about the past and the future, as well as north, south, east, and west simultaneously.

The title *Mnemonics* means, literally, a system to improve or develop memory. Both in its process and its permanent presence, the project asks the school to remember, but it is essentially different from traditional memorial artworks. First, the artists asked the users to define their own history in the eighty-eight blocks from past classes and the equal number of future classes. In addition, each individual block is very modest, implying that history should not be boiled down to a series of great monuments or “great men,” but exists as multiple experiences. Although the project was a massive undertaking over four years, each block is personal and approachable. This project, through the participation of literally hundreds of people, creates an image of what education is, in a mode quite similar to that undertaken by Paulo Freire (although Jones and Ginzel were not influenced by him directly). Not only were all of the past classes included in the project, but eighty-eight future classes will need to participate before the project is complete. The artwork insists upon ongoing dialogue, and the artists have asked the community of the school to define itself, to decide which objects will represent each class in a kind of self-portrait of the first 176 years (88 past and 88 future classes) of the school. Demanding eighty-eight years of participation is an optimistic gesture in the context of the New York City Board of Education. Jones and Ginzel were able to weave a project through this building that has an individual, as well as interdependent voices—of the artists, the school community, and the hundreds of people worldwide who participated in collecting objects for the glass bricks.

Mnemonics was created at a time of an intense building campaign for the Board of Education in New York City. Between 1989 and 1994, the Board of Education, the School Construction Authority, and New York City’s Percent for Art Program commissioned well over 100 artists to create new site-specific works for public schools in every borough. It was the largest and most significant series of public art commissions in New York City since the WPA.¹

Tom Finkelppearl: Let’s start from the beginning. You went in for an interview at the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs for the Stuyvesant High School project?

Andrew Ginzel: Yes. We were asked to interview without creating any kind of proposal, although we were asked in a general way how we might approach the school.

Kristin Jones: All we could do was explain that our work is varied and evolves from a specific understanding of the context and site. We could not even begin to fathom what we would do.

AG: We had never been faced with a challenge such as this, with a directive to create a work that was meant to last, to endure 100 years. We believed that it was important to consider the entirety, the school as a whole—the present and past, as well as the future. It seemed logical that you'd have to spend time in the old school before proposing something for the new school.

KJ: We had built a single public art piece before in Portland, Oregon. That gave us credibility for permanent commissions because so much of what we had done had been ephemeral. It's surprising to be chosen for a project when you haven't made a specific proposal. It is an act of faith to choose artists on the basis of their past work, on the seriousness of their intent.

TF: Of course, this is a philosophical position of New York City's Percent for Art Program. If the artists are going to work for five years on a project, it doesn't make sense that they be bound by a proposal developed over a couple of weeks. With design competitions, which are favored by some cities, the artist locks in to a design at the start, and then you spend five years executing it. After selection, how did you get started?

KJ: Even before meeting with the architect, we went to the old Stuyvesant High School.

AG: Neither of us had experience in a big city public school. I grew up in Chicago, but the school I went to was not a science/math high school and was much smaller. Kristin had also attended smaller schools.

KJ: It was wonderful, all of a sudden, to be immersed within the environment of eighty-eight years of accumulated history, of this New York City public school . . .

AG: . . . where nothing was ever thrown out. It seemed like the Board of Education never had any way of deaccessioning things. The school was an incredible museum of late nineteenth-century education.

KJ: The spirit of the school was really contagious. The place has an enormous amount of pride as a public place. We sensed this spirit immediately.

AG: The old school was endowed with an incredible sense of history of the city as a whole, a microcosm of New York. There was a really organic quality—different phases and different lives. And the makeup of the school population has changed so dramatically through the years.

KJ: It's really a gauge for the . . .

AG: . . . waves of immigration . . .

KJ: . . . the ambitious immigrants who flow into this country and create the energy of the city. You can feel the sense of striving and integrity in the school. Many students are not necessarily even born in this country, and oftentimes they are the only ones in the family that speak English. There is a definite sense of excitement within the place, a sense of the appreciation of the gift of intelligence.

AG: Even though the old building was physically inadequate for the rapid evolution of contemporary education, there was this real lament about having to abandon ship. The building had a distinct patina about it. While the school community was excited about the move, and had worked for years to create a new school, the sense of nostalgia, of history, was very real.

KJ: The physical building was very much a part of the identity of the school.

AG: The stone steps in the main staircase were literally worn down. The concave steps bore evidence of the generations of graduates.

KJ: In this city, in this country, there is so little sense of accumulated history, and however brief the history of the school, it just seemed very pertinent. There was so much humanity, so much history of the country captured in the place. It all seemed very poignant.

TF: I've heard that the three most traumatic things in life are marriage, death, and moving. Moving can be traumatic, especially if it's a place that you really identify with.

KJ: It really does challenge you, your whole sense of identity, because all of a sudden . . . who are you? You've established yourself. You've laid your roots. It is a shock to move to a school that's ten stories high, that has express escalators skipping floors.

AG: Also, the turf. The land that the new school is built on had never existed before. It's landfill. It has no history.

TF: The old school was on Fifteenth Street and First Avenue. What neighborhood would you call that?

KJ: Stuyvesant Town.

AG: The whole neighborhood is associated with the school or Stuyvesant in a lot of different ways.

KJ: Peter Stuyvesant is buried at St. Mark's Church nearby [the old site]. But the school itself was not necessarily tied only to the neighborhood. The wonderful thing is that students attend this special public school from all boroughs. It really is representative of the city. Like the island of Manhattan itself, Stuyvesant draws people from the entire city. Students come to Stuyvesant by choice, if they are smart enough to pass the qualifying exam.

AG: You sense right away that the vitality of the school really is the kids that are in it. It's not that there aren't some great teachers, but the faculty and staff are pretty much standard Board of Ed. people on a Board of Ed. budget.

KJ: The selection of the faculty and administration is not . . .

AG: . . . as specialized as the selection of the students. When we were selected, the building was in a relatively advanced planning stage, but many of the details were still pretty open. We were introduced to Joe Lengeling, the project architect for Cooper Robertson, who was responsible for the building with Gruzen Samton Steinglass. Cooper Robertson were the design architects, while Gruzen were the mechanical/programmatic planners. But Joe, luckily, was a very sympathetic figure who spent a lot of time with us, trying to explain how this very complicated machine of a building was going to operate.

KJ: We could sense that he was completely passionate about this project. And he was also completely open to the mystery of what we might do. He wasn't afraid of us as artists. He was really curious, and interested in working with us somehow.

AG: And then there was Renée Levine, who is . . .

KJ: . . . the self-ordained matron of the school.

AG: Early on we found ourselves being drawn into the school, and wanted to be. We started spending a lot of time at the old school. For example, we went to the school's theatrical productions, like South Pacific. We were watching what was going on, talking to people, exploring the floors and classrooms. Trying to get a feel for the place.

KJ: Digging around in the hidden recesses of the school was an adventure. It seemed to us that the place did not need an isolated art object per se, a special chandelier hanging from the skylight or a sculpture of Peter Stuyvesant in the entryway. We realized that our audience was going to be present for four years, and that it would be important to us to make something that could somehow stimulate, intrigue, and mystify them, perhaps forever, to sort of haunt them.

AG: We started to realize that the alumni of the school were remarkably attached to their memories. Many of these students had gone on to become accomplished in later life, but still had this attachment. We would mention that we were working on this project for Stuyvesant, and people in the city would immediately react, because they knew it was a special place, a legend of sorts. By spending time in the school, we realized that the place not only embodied a treasury of memories, but also was a treasure trove of broken scientific models, of musical instruments, violins and beautiful wax toads . . .

KJ: There was a history of the evolution of science in the closets of the school.

AG: The cabinets in the chemistry lab were filled with beautiful hand-blown glassware. There were piles of old surveying equipment down in the basement. So it seemed like a resource. It also became very clear to us that the whole sense of education had radically changed, that the sense of the empirical, of investigation, was going to be transformed in this new building. The new building is now filled with fiber optic communications. Every classroom has a very large monitor in it. The students are largely on computer. So there is this radical shift in the way that education is being addressed. It seemed to us that this change in sensibility, away from the more empirical investigation had . . . an aura.

TF: From your previous work, it is clear that you love the look of old science—old beakers and stuff like that. So, one of the kinds of things that you are very attracted to happened to be filling all the closets in the old school.

KJ: We use a wide range of materials and have used scientific glassware before. It seemed like such a crime to have a completely sterile new building that, aside from the name, had no connection to, no memory of the old school.

AG: We started to believe that the new building should be somehow infused, in a way that you could never grasp totally. So, a student coming into the school for four years would never quite be able to see all of what we had done.

KJ: Dispersing the project throughout the school was an attempt to try to affect the whole place, and suggest that perhaps every block that the school is built of is a potential clue to something else.

AG: The school was built extremely solidly, for a contemporary building. The interior walls of the school are all masonry. They break down into 8- x 8-inch increments of glass block and structural, ceramic-glazed tiles. So it seemed logical, in a certain way, to use this increment and infuse something into the infrastructure.

TF: Did you talk about these ideas with the architect or with Renée Levine?

KJ: Yes, with the architect. We were trying to think of something to really involve the current and future students, the alumni, and faculty, so it was theirs, so it wasn't some sort of apparition that came from nowhere that didn't relate to the place. We wanted to combine a lament of the loss of the empirical approach to the world, with the alumni lament of leaving the old school. We imagined that the alumni who meet the first Thursday of every month in the library might want to be involved in the project, because they were so sad to leave the old school. We also saw that the students were incredibly active with a million clubs. (Apparently, in order to get into college, it looks good if you are president of a club. So every single senior class member is a president of a club.) We thought maybe this could be like a club. We would get a lot of the students to participate.

AG: And everyone kept on saying how they wished they could take a sense of the old school with them. Through all of this, we started developing this sense of addressing memory: the memory of the history of the world, the memory of the old school. We also wanted to project into the future, creating a point, a reference point in this history of the school, where one side is a reflection of the other, projecting something into the future while looking into the past. The school was eighty-eight years old. In eighty-eight years, the new building will probably be considered obsolete. People will start thinking about what to do next.



Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, Mnemonics, 1992, Stuyvesant High School, New York, New York. Commissioned by Battery Park City Authority, New York City Board of Education, New York City Percent for Art Program. Photograph: T. Charles Erickson.

TF: Can you describe the blocks physically? What is in the blocks? How many are there?

AG: Officially, there are exactly 400. It's funny, things are so regimented until you actually get on the site and start working. We actually put more blocks in the building than anyone knows about.

TF: What sorts of objects are in the blocks?

AG: There are three basic categories. The first group is eighty-eight empty blocks. They have future years sandblasted into them—eighty-eight years from the date of the new school's opening in 1992. They are made to be filled and resealed by each graduating class.

KJ: So there are individual blocks, dispersed throughout the building, that mark the inevitable passing of time, up to the year 2080.

AG: *Then there are eighty-eight blocks that are sealed and mortared into the interior walls. They contain artifacts that refer to the eighty-eight years of the school's history, starting from its inception. These "past" blocks are composed of artifacts and documents that were solicited from the alumni, gathered from the old school itself, somehow culled from various sources. Then the third category is a field of various disparate things from all over the world. Some of them are enigmas, some are clearly defined by an inscription in the glass.*

KJ: *It's a field of relics.*

TF: *Let's talk about each set of blocks. The eighty-eight blocks with dates stretching into the future are going to be opened, and . . .*

KJ: *Filled by each senior class.*

TF: *How does that work?*

AG: *There is a special cabinet in the principal's office, mounted high up on the wall. It contains the instructions, the tools, all the documentation on the extensive campaign to obtain the artifacts, as well as the apparatus for opening the "future" blocks. Once a year, a representative from the senior class is given access to the apparatus to open up the block and insert the new material selected by the seniors. So the work continues to grow, but is no longer our work. It becomes theirs. In the last three years, the students have simply done it themselves.*

KJ: *Although the blocks are mortared into the wall, we provided a very serious suction cup to pull out the front face, and then set it back in with one-way screws.*

TF: *What sort of objects are they meant to put in each year?*

KJ: *The thought is very much related to Proust's idea of biting into the madeleine. The elements placed within are meant to bring back a flood of memories,*

of vivid remembrances. So it's a trigger for memory. Hence the title, Mnemonics.

AG: The first year the new school was open was a particularly poignant one, because of the bombing at the World Trade Center . . .

TF: . . . which is two city blocks away from the school.

AG: At the end of that year, students petitioned the FBI and they were actually given this piece of evidence, a piece of concrete with a tire track on it.

KJ: From ground zero.

AG: I think they chose this particular relic to put in their block because that day the earth shook. It was a memorable occasion. The students were highly restricted in what they could do during the investigation of the bombing. For example, they couldn't go out and use the empty lots as playing fields.

TF: So they had a particular personal relationship with that bombing, as opposed to the public relationship . . .

KJ: In a way, it's perfect, because it was a moment in time that everybody can absolutely remember where they were.

TF: So, students will be placing these objects in blocks after we are all dead. As artists, you've initiated something, but it is also out of your control. You are passing on some of the essence of creation to the public that you are addressing. You are allowing them . . .

KJ: . . . to leave something behind. You inhabit buildings. You inhabit apartments. You inhabit spaces your entire life. But how often do you ever leave a mark that is, in fact, an identifying mark?

AG: It's like when you do reconstruction, and you break through a wall and reveal somebody's writing. Even if it's just scratching, like the arithmetic of some

sort of construction detail, it's always so fascinating, interesting to make that kind of contact with the past, with a specific instant in time.

KJ: Like the baked paw print of a dog walking over clay tiles in Pompeii.

AG: You see empty blocks all over the school. Because each block has a year sand-blasted on the interior face of the glass, you constantly confront, in your visual field, all these points of reference in the future which haven't existed yet. Those years haven't occurred but they are inevitable. Whether or not the school exists or the city exists, the year will exist.

KJ: There is a distinct optimism. It is so mysterious to fathom the senior class of 2034. What will it be like then?

AG: Especially in reference to looking at the block from 1934. Things in the 1934 block are so radically different than what is being seen today.

TF: How did you go about gathering the objects to represent each of the years since 1912?

AG: Most immediately, we rummaged through the school.

KJ: Especially for the early years, where there are not alumni around from the classes.

AG: We found files filled with the index cards from grade reports from 1913.

KJ: I think originally we imagined that each member of the alumni association would take a great deal of time and do it themselves. In fact, that is not what happened. We had a very hard time even getting the mailing list out of the alumni association, because they were sure we were going to sell it. So we kept getting a few more names and a few more names, and we eventually mailed out hundreds of letters.

AG: We got a lot of donations through the alumni telethon that we participated in. We . . .

KJ: . . . hired students, having learned not to rely on volunteers.

AG: So we were actually on the phones, talking to alumni, soliciting materials.

KJ: We'd say, "With your check, go through your drawers and find something, and send it to us."

AG: We put advertisements in the alumni newsletter. We sent out letters.

KJ: Some classes sent us much too much, and other classes were less responsive. The last four months we were calling people all over the country encouraging alumni, describing the project . . .

AG: We also found certain students, or ex-students, who were totally fanatic about the school, who kept every last little memento of their experience.

KJ: So, sometimes if they were there for four years, they would have things from years other than their graduating class. Really gung-ho alumni would be able to help us fill the blocks for four years.

AG: There were many very touching things. For example, we got a little bowl made in shop class from 1913, from someone who had actually become a university president. He had kept it with his personal mementos on his dresser for years. He wrote this wonderful letter. So there were things that were really rather evocative.

TF: Once you had all these objects, you made the decisions about how to assemble them.

AG: We started making files or boxes. We had boxes and boxes and boxes of things. We created collages with these artifacts.

KJ: According to what we got. We went through all the yearbooks and created our own verbal history of the school, so that we knew, for example, that in a particular year there was a new principal. Every time there's a new principal, that was a landmark. We had to create a structure of the history. We knew that



Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, *Mnemonics*, 1992. Photograph: T. Charles Erickson.

many of the teachers went to war in 1918. We knew that women entered the school in 1969, and there was a lot of controversy. A lot of donations related to the history of the country as a whole . . .

AG: And since they were moving out of the old building, we got carte blanche to go through and chip off pieces of architecture, and unscrew railings, doorknobs, take numbers off doors, things like that. Many of these objects ended up in the past-year blocks.

TF: So, then the third group, around 225 blocks, consisted of objects from all over the world.

KJ: We were most interested in this aspect of the project. The whole piece ties together here. We were especially excited about projecting the concept out into the world.

TF: *How many people around the world would you estimate you contacted for these blocks?*

AG: *About 1,200.*

For the third group, we were interested in creating this field, almost as if you were in a magnetic field, surrounded by all of the world, fragments compressed down into this school building. So, as you move through the building, you are constantly being referred to other places. For example, think of a student who is assigned a locker, and next to it there is this block with some sort of enigma—like a rock with the geographical coordinates of its origin. We were thinking that perhaps that student would look at it for three years, and then maybe one day he or she would say, “Wait, I’m curious about this. What is it?”, and go to the library, look it up, become engaged with it. Because there are so many points in the entire school like that, it creates this whole set of questions.

KJ: *It seemed important to attempt to place the school within the context of the history of New York, but also to place the school and the city in the context of the evolution of the history of the world, because it’s so easy to forget.*

TF: *What were your sources in conceptualizing these blocks?*

KJ: *In our minds, there were some immediate inspirations. One is this hushed, shadowy room at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, where this relic of the whisker of the prophet Mohammed is displayed, and people tiptoe around it. There’s that suspension of disbelief. Is that really the whisker from the beard of the prophet? Is it true? Could it be?*

AG: *We made a point in Stuyvesant that everything that is there is really what it is said to be, except for one thing. There is one block that has this small Inca reproduction figure that was purchased at the Met in the gift shop, and that block is inscribed with the word “false.” It serves as a reference point in the whole system . . .*

KJ: . . . because people do wonder if everything really is from its stated origin. It would have been a lot easier to turn on the tap and fill up the bottle that says, "Snow, Mt. Fuji."

AG: I want to mention two other important reference points. One is a room in New Jersey at the Edison Laboratories. When Thomas Edison was working on the incandescent light bulb, he and his crew were looking for material to use as filament. There is this one storage room that's filled with different kinds of filaments—from ox hair to coconut fiber. There is a sense of the compression of the entire world within this room . . .

KJ: It is very much of the same time of the old Stuyvesant High School, in the same spirit.

AG: There is a real sense of empirical investigation, that you would actually physically investigate. Instead of relating to the world through a formula or working with a computer model, you are actually bringing something from the rest of the world and using it as a possibility of creating something new. Another important point of reference is the Chicago Tribune Building, which was a result of the famous architectural competition. The building that was eventually built is studded around the perimeter with fragments of other architecture. It is kind of odd.

KJ: These architectural fragments were collected by journalists throughout the world for the Chicago Tribune. So there was this sense of the world in the building, which was very exciting. We thought, "Here we are, this is New York City, this school is going to be a model school. The project is sponsored by the city of New York, by the Board of Education. What are our resources? What can we do here? We have the United Nations. Ahaa!" And so we attempted to tap into all the various consulates that are here in New York. But, in fact, after writing a whole slew of letters to foreign consulates here in New York, we realized that their being here in New York would make the process too indirect to solicit artifacts from beyond the city, from the world.

AG: So we asked the commissioner of Cultural Affairs to write, on our behalf, to every American ambassador abroad, asking them for something that was intrinsic to where they were stationed. The letter indicated some guidelines and suggestions of what sort of donations we were seeking. For a long, long time we'd get these packages in the mail. There was some pretty wonderful participation.

KJ: We called the U.S. Department of State and got their list of ambassadors and consuls throughout the world and their "APO" numbers. It's the interdiplomatic service that requires spending only local postage. I knew about it because I grew up in embassies around the world myself. I also knew that there were cultural affairs officers in every embassy.

The first group of letters that we sent out to ambassadors resulted in some artifacts that we really didn't want, like tourist trinkets. We didn't want a little sculpture of the mermaid in the Copenhagen Harbor, even though it is a tourist artifact that symbolizes the place. And so we wrote a second batch of letters, saying that we wanted something that really could not be bought, that was of the place, either geographically or historically, and saying that we didn't want to become colonial vandals. We wanted to make sure that the artifacts were from the place, but, in fact, that they had no monetary value.

AG: We didn't want things extracted from buildings. We targeted people. For example, we were interested in obtaining leaves from the sacred Bo tree in Sri Lanka. That was one case where a major effort was made on behalf of the Cultural Affairs office from the American Consulate. They actually sent out an employee to wait for one of these leaves to fall from the tree. You have to wait your turn for a leaf to fall outside the walls of the enclosed shrine. The leaves are treasured relics.

KJ: The letter that went out to the ambassadors was quite general. We didn't dictate what we wanted except in a small number of cases. We very much wanted the participation of people's imagination. We said if you have no imagination, just pick up some dirt, or fill a bottle with river water—but send us

something from the place. It was exciting to get things that we just couldn't quite imagine ourselves. We asked the ambassadors themselves for suggestions of what relic could be symbolic of the particular country. We felt that it was our responsibility to create a situation for Stuyvesant High School, in which the students could understand that what's accessible to them in a school is the whole world of knowledge, not just the particular lesson of the moment.

AG: Another side of this story is that from about 1980, I had been collecting little samples—dust and particles of things from all over the world. I had them in test tubes and little packets. So we did have quite a few relics ourselves.

KJ: Andrew already had the fragment from the Great Pyramid of Cheops.

TF: You got the commission in '88 and installed it in '92, so collecting all of these artifacts was a four-year process.

AG: Yes. And simultaneously, we were working with the plans for the new building, starting to develop a sense of where and how to place the glass blocks. We made the decision that they should all be in public spaces within the building, even though the building is a closed world of sorts. We were also conscious that the building was going to be used for other kinds of community events, that the pool was going to be open, and that slowly but surely there would be other kinds of interaction with the community within the school.

KJ: The blocks were not placed in the classrooms, but in the hallways, the gym, the pool . . .

AG: . . . the most public of spaces.

TF: There's also a lot of New York City history in there.

KJ: I think this was important because the site, the land, had absolutely no history. It is new. It is landfill. We did solicit, or attempt to solicit, artifacts from all the

institutions we could dream of that might have some fragments of New York City history, but it was impossible because . . .

AG: . . . there is no mechanism for deaccessioning things.

KJ: Even if there were 10,000 bricks torn up from a street that were used as ballast in ships coming from Holland, we couldn't have one, because there is no mechanism for a request like that.

TF: So how did you obtain all the relics from New York's past?

KJ: It was a stroke of luck. We called around, starting at NYU . . . Calling various institutions around the city that might teach urban archaeology and New York City history.

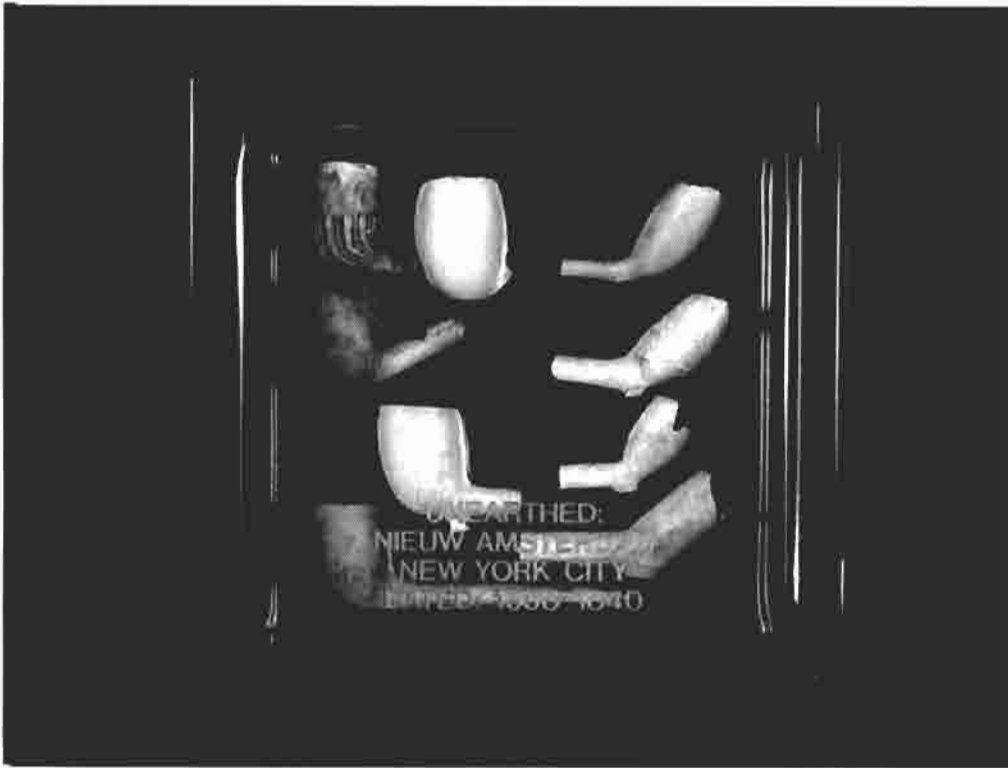
AG: We spoke to commercial archaeologists, the ones that get hired by building contractors to search sites.

KJ: We talked to the chief archaeologist at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. She said, "Don't tell him I gave you his name, but call William Asadorian. He is a librarian at Queens College, and he has been, for the last thirty years, going through all the dirt that Con Edison has rummaged through in order to lay pipes in the city."

AG: He goes around and finds sites that are being excavated.

KJ: He is totally passionate about history, about dirt. On nights and weekends, this guy sifts dirt and has gathered together an incredible collection of the history of New York, just by virtue of the fact that the hole is dug. He claims to have gone through 80 percent of the dirt that is the landfill that Stuyvesant is on. He has been searching in all good faith and spirit to find a home for his collection.

AG: But because it's been collected in a . . .



Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, *Mnemonics*, 1992. Photograph: T. Charles Erickson.

KJ: . . . totally illegitimate way, archaeologically, without documenting the stratigraphy, so it becomes tainted material in the eyes of so-called legitimate archaeologists. According to some, he's been removing evidence.

AG: Of course, when Con Ed digs, they are not about to document the stratigraphy.

KJ: The contention is that taking the artifact out removes the reference to site. If Con Edison were just allowed to put the dirt back in the hole, then the site would be relatively intact when archaeologists come around. Asadorian was really hoping to have much more of a historical display of his collection in a cohesive place. I think he would have liked to have had all the history of New York in chronological order on the ground floor. He was very generous, and in the end he was pleased with the project as a whole.



Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, Mnemonics, 1992. View of students with L. H. Latimer block in lunchroom at Stuyvesant High School. Photograph: T. Charles Erickson.

TF: He gave you, for example, the pipes from New Amsterdam?

KJ: He gave us the 200-year history of planting tobacco in the New World. There is a block with nine pipes from the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century.

AG: The earliest ones, made in Holland, were very small because tobacco was precious at that time. By 1840, the pipes made in the United States were much larger, because . . .

KJ: . . . tobacco was more abundant. The most difficult part was finding anything pre-European in New Amsterdam. He had not found any woodland Indian artifacts in downtown Manhattan or New Amsterdam. The artifacts that he gave us from Woodland culture were found . . .

AG: . . . in Upper Manhattan, or maybe the Bronx.

TF: How would you describe the aesthetics of this piece. Where is the beauty?

AG: Well, I don't know about beauty, but I think that, because of its dispersal, and because of its references, it is about inquiry, and about getting people to think. It's not about our personal egos. There is not much of our hand.

KJ: I hope that the beauty of the work is the collective expansion of the sense of accumulated history—that you exist in a moment in time, and that time continues. I think that providing these relics, these seeds to this whole explosive volume of information reflects the exhilarating side to education.

AG: I think the aesthetic is not quite graspable, that you can't really see it. To experience it, you have to use the building. The work is accumulative. It is a succession of information, of clues. Each segment of it is accessible in a very intimate, immediate way. Looking at a single block you see 1/400th of the whole. You experience one part of it, but it needs to grow.

KJ: There's an intimacy, because each block is the size of your face. Only one person can look at a block at a time.

TF: Public art is normally monumental, meant to be seen by crowds of people, appreciated by "the public" as a group at one time. But here, there could be twenty people looking at different blocks at different parts of the school at the same time.

AG: In a way, so much of the work was the experience of the whole four-year process of making it. That's where we got very intimate, so to speak, handling the artifacts, carefully tailoring and assembling them. As it exists now, it's allowed to be much more "out there" and less personal. The project refers to the person who is looking at it. Our view is not imposed.

KJ: In all of our work we attempt to look at the site and situation. Public art is different. We felt that it was imperative to imagine something that truly could belong and truly could become . . . part of the place, the place itself.

TF: *It's interesting that your time for making this piece was the same as a student going to Stuyvesant—four years. It's like you graduated when you finished. Your creative process mirrored the time frame within which people are going to view it. James Joyce said that it took him a lifetime to write Finnegans Wake . . .*

KJ: *. . . and it should take someone a lifetime to read it.*

TF: *Of course, you didn't simply reflect Stuyvesant's reality, but helped to transform it as you reflected it. Stuyvesant has a certain set of ideals. It has a sense of itself that has to do with its history, its future, and its status in the world. What you did was provide an image of its best possible self. It was not critical, in the sense of tearing down an institution, but it certainly encouraged a certain part of the school's tradition.*

KJ: *Why would you want to tear down this institution? They were building a new school. It's a fascinating notion to take a group of people and give them a name, and give them a sense of purpose. What is a group of people? How do you possibly qualify it? And just the notion of the students graduating and going out into the world is, in a way, symbolic of the work that we did. It's exactly what the school produces, this group of people that venture forth and have entire professional careers that all begin there. It really is the beginning. So each block, in a way, is symbolic of one student, one mind, one person.*

AG: *There are other subtexts that relate to our sense of the value of all matter. We took objects that are so specific, like a piece of the Great Wall of China, and put them in the same context as this anonymous piece of rock picked up above the Arctic Circle, and displayed them on an equal plane. These things are as precious as the hair of the prophet Mohammed.*

KJ: *So the red, red earth from Australia . . .*

AG: *. . . and things that are made by human beings are put on the same plane.*

KJ: What is the history of this granule, this handful, this cupful of sand? They are presented equally. And there is a perspective on this American phenomena, this culture of the accumulated peoples from the world. But where does our history begin? It's certainly not just on this continent.

AG: The objects in the project and the population of the school reflect the incredible diversity of this city. It is the people of this place that make it so special.

Notes

1. For a catalogue of many of the projects that were installed at New York City's public schools, see *Art for Learning* (New York: Municipal Art Society, New York City Board of Education, 1994), pp. 24–32.