

Art in Public Spaces: Women, Memory and Community

Farkas, Suzanne. [WE International](#). Toronto: [Winter 1999](#). , Iss. 46/47; pg. 33

Abstract (Summary)

"Dream Figures" currently on display in Toronto's Don River Valley, exemplifies the challenge to monumental authority. Veronica created this work in answer to a call by the City of Toronto's Environmental Art project "Ecolage" under the City's ongoing **Public Art** program. Ecolage was created to assist a community group gain public support for the revitalization of the Don River watershed. The Don, once an important historical and industrial corridor, was a unique natural system, is now badly polluted and forgotten. Linking open or wild public spaces with an urban art event encourages active participation and might change the public's opinion of the value of this area.

Verkley blurs the line between species and uses the symbols of "anima" to explore our concepts of humanness, instinct, gesture, and emotion. The figures are creatures larger than life, reminiscent of the once common bird, bear, and elk. The sculptures bear expressive tilts of the head or leg, cocked in a familiar seemingly human gesture. Evoking memories of a time when urban was rural, the figures watch the City's commuters. Half hidden by the natural undergrowth, they sadly peer out to the six lane highway that now severs this valley from the busy residential district beyond. These figures are our markers. They sit on the edge of a once mighty watershed marking time, place and relationships, our potential and our destruction, our past and our future, our urban and our hinterland.

In "Too Close to Home," women artists Merry Conway and Noni Pratt explore father - daughter relationships by publicly displaying objects and memorabilia donated by residents living in the community. The installation was displayed in an abandoned bank site, intended for renovation into a new museum in the American City of New Bedford. People instinctively recognized the empowerment that comes with making what is private, public, and art's unique ability to communicate and engage. More than 100 people donated personal effects and any wild variety of objects that might evoke a memory. In an article describing their project, Conway stated: "It's an amazing thing to have it [their items] put into a public forum. You take something personal, have it publicly displayed as art, and when you get it back after people have looked at it, your sense of it has changed. It's about what we value." The article goes on to say: "One woman who had contributed items, brought her father who (sic) she hadn't seen in 30 years. The salty retired sailor said to the artists: 'Girls, I've spent my whole life running away and leaving my girls behind. This is important for men to see,' He returned every day with friends." 4 This project, by its engagement with its community, was able to physically manifest the inner life and the commonality that linked the people, their homes and their lives in the community.

>> [Jump to indexing \(document details\)](#)

Full Text

(1711 words)

Copyright *WEED Foundation Winter 1999*

ART IN PUBLIC SPACES: Women, Memory and Community

by Suzanne Farkas

"MONUMENTS ARE HUMAN landmarks which men have created as symbols for their ideals, their aims and for their actions. Monuments have to satisfy the eternal demand of the people for translation of their collective force into symbols," Sert, Leger, Giedron. 1

Cities around the world are grappling with the complex challenge of remaining viable places to live and work. Part of their challenge is this struggle to redefine and preserve the quality of their public spaces. Community is a state of mind but it is intimately tied to public place. Sustainability of public spaces, particularly green spaces against vandalism or degeneration, depends on how or what kinds of connection people have to it. The more people see the relevance in the place they live, the better the connection, community and space.

Public Art is often seen as an alienating presence in urban neighbourhoods. Traditionally, public art is a tool deliberately designed to preserve the image, and thereby extend the power of the ruling authority, class and patriarchal order. This fact is not lost on the subjects of this authority. From violent disfigurement to the marks of graffiti, monuments have long been targets of revolutions and other expressions of resistance.

Recently however, alternative visions of public art are emerging and women artists throughout the world appear to be leading in their development. What would women want to remember? How might a woman's monument differ from the patriarchal monolithic form?

One aspect of monument and public art has never really been challenged. Monuments by definition are permanent lasting structures, with a unifying authority: one truth, one history, one memory! The enshrining of public heroes and mythology defines the communal authority while it obscures the personal experience.

The artists who challenge this concept of permanence open themselves up to professional derision. Why, the very definition of a "true" masterpiece is its ability to withstand the test of time and idiosyncrasy.

Veronica Verkley is part of a growing movement of installation artists working with found materials. Veronica, however, has gone one step further. Her work does not instill a sense of permanency. In her recent work "Dream Figures" she has bravely set aside personal ego, to explore the true essence of Nature, the dynamic of ecosystem and the human's place in it.

"Dream Figures" currently on display in Toronto's Don River Valley, exemplifies the challenge to monumental authority. Veronica created this work in answer to a call by the City of Toronto's Environmental Art project "Ecolage" under the City's ongoing Public Art program. Ecolage was created to assist a community group gain public support for the revitalization of the Don River watershed. The Don, once an important historical and industrial corridor, was a unique natural system, is now badly polluted and forgotten. Linking open or wild public spaces with an urban art event encourages active participation and might change the public's opinion of the value of this area.

As if awakened from the mists of Avalon, the "Dream Figures" sweep over me with their presence. Oddly I feel a vague memory of an absence long forgotten. At once I am aware of their ancient looming power almost equal to the pain of their great loss. Once these woods were alive with spirits, and Mother Earth was our succor.

Verkley blurs the line between species and uses the symbols of "anima" to explore our concepts of humanness, instinct, gesture, and emotion. The figures are creatures larger than life, reminiscent of the once common bird, bear, and elk. The sculptures bear expressive tilts of the head or leg, cocked in a familiar seemingly human gesture. Evoking memories of a time when urban was rural, the figures watch the City's commuters. Half hidden by the natural undergrowth, they sadly peer out to the six lane highway that now severs this valley from the busy residential district beyond. These figures are our markers. They sit on the edge of a once mighty watershed marking time, place and relationships, our potential and our destruction, our past and our future, our urban and our hinterland.

Veronica sculpts with found organic materials and underbrush, cast off urban debris of trash, car parts and industrial objects. Her structures are designed to change with the seasons and eventually become one with the surrounding vegetation. Thus, Verkley plays with the temporal nature of life and edifice. With these elements she expresses the imperfect, impermanent and fleeting power of memory and authority of public place. Her vision of public monument in this organic form defies traditional rules of formal sculpture, art and public expression of civic pride. It is in her choice to subjugate her ego and open her forest beings up to the elements that bring the work its power. Our need to be connected to our physical spaces is clear. It confronts us with our own ephemeral life force. Our patriarchal psyche has set its conquest as our perpetual goal, yet Nature is still our master.

Her works are deceptive and disarmingly simple. This encourages familiarity and the viewer becomes part of the re-creation of memory. Viewers begin to reflect on their role in creating this urban community, once rooted in nature and place. As such her work reflects the inner as well as the external landscape, the personal as well as the monumental.

Beth Alber's Marker of Change 1996 is another radically open, anti monumental monument. Alber, a Canadian artist, was commissioned by a local community college women's center. The college is situated in an inner city neighborhood of Vancouver. The purpose of the monument was to commemorate the women victims of violence. In particular, it was dedicated to the 14 young women engineering students who were massacred in 1987 by a disgruntled and disturbed male student in the City of Montreal, Canada.

The monument is placed in a grassy opening in the woods of a park adjacent to the college and the downtown core. In its choice of subject matter and design concept, it challenges traditions of public art. Simply, it consists of 14 benches set in a circle, enclosed by a low brick curb. The monument provides a resting place among the woods, encouraging contemplation; it is open to regeneration and play, and a range of individual emotions. It is a space to gather, a healing circle. Alber's use of site, materials and form, like Verkley's subtly implies change.

Growth not permanence is its goal. Its power lies in its call to remember, while also remaining open to possibility, community and future.

Public art does not need to be rarified, larger than life. It can be a tool to actively create links. Suzanne Lacey, renowned American artist and critic, describes a model of public art which differs from traditional art in that it is defined by its relationship to its audience. ² The goal of public art should be to engage its audience in issues directly related to their lives. In her recent work, *Underground*, she works collaboratively with battered women's centers to make a public act, art as an occasion for community building. Simultaneously she deliberately seizes the opportunity to create a place for women to make the private choice to get away from the violence. The art connects the viewers with the resources and describes underground networks that can sustain an escape. ³

In "Too Close to Home," women artists Merry Conway and Noni Pratt explore father - daughter relationships by publicly displaying objects and memorabilia donated by residents living in the community. The installation was displayed in an abandoned bank site, intended for renovation into a new museum in the American City of New Bedford. People instinctively recognized the empowerment that comes with making what is private, public, and art's unique ability to communicate and engage. More than 100 people donated personal effects and any wild variety of objects that might evoke a memory. In an article describing their project, Conway stated: "It's an amazing thing to have it [their items] put into a public forum. You take something personal, have it publicly displayed as art, and when you get it back after people have looked at it, your sense of it has changed. It's about what we value." The article goes on to say: "One woman who had contributed items, brought her father who (sic) she hadn't seen in 30 years. The salty retired sailor said to the artists: 'Girls, I've spent my whole life running away and leaving my girls behind. This is important for men to see,' He returned every day with friends." ⁴ This project, by its engagement with its community, was able to physically manifest the inner life and the commonality that linked the people, their homes and their lives in the community.

Memory is crucial to our sense of identity and worthiness. Altering history or collective memory is a crucial tool in cultural conquest. Its effect is to erase the clues that may prompt us to challenge the authority that rules us. As Kelley states: "We forget what is not possible, pare down instead to what is necessary, what is required, what can just barely, after all be dreamed of." ⁵ Without verifiable public cues to awaken our memories and legitimize our personal experiences as women and as an active part of the body politic, we remain alienated, our actions trivialized, our contributions forgotten and thus our dreams of the possible are reduced to only that which is acceptable.

The common element in these women's alternative views of public art, is in the ability to evoke a new sense and definition of community, one which acknowledges the alienated and encourages open dialogue and inclusion. These elements are vital for the development and growth of art in public places and in its potential to contribute to the struggle for viable cities.

1 Sert, Leger, Giedron "Nine Points of Monumentality," 1943, reprinted in *Introspections*, Feb. 1997, MACBA, Barcelona.

2 Suzanne Lacey, "Mapping the Terrain," Bay Press, San Francisco, 1995.

3 C. Kelley, "Creating Memory, Contesting History," *Matriart*, vol. 5, #3, 1995, Toronto.

4 D. Cospers, "Action," *Metropolis*, (Community) Nov. 1996, New York.

5 Op cited, Kelley.

Suzanne Farkas, MES, consults in occupational health, safety and the environment and lectures at Ryerson Polytechnic University.