

The New York Times

City Room
Blogging From the Five Boroughs

Answers About Public Art in New York, Part 3

By The New York Times July 31, 2009 2:01 pm

Following is the **third and final** set of answers from Jean Parker Phifer, the author of “Public Art New York” (Norton, 2009).

We are no longer accepting questions for this feature.

Why are all the art pieces on display in this city abstract? What ever happened to sculptures? How could a person get commissioned to create a sculpture of John Lennon, Kurt Vonnegut or another New Yorker who contributed to the art of our city?

— Posted by John Powers

Several representational sculptures of prominent New Yorkers have in fact been installed in public places in the recent years. A somewhat formalized depiction of Duke Ellington stands atop his memorial by Robert Graham at Fifth Avenue and 110th Street, and a realistic, life-size figure of Malcolm X by Gabriel Koren appears to give a speech in the lobby of the Audubon Ballroom at 3940 Broadway. There are many others spread over the city, including a diminutive figure of Fred Lebow, founder of the New York City Marathon, near 90th Street in Central Park.

Initial thoughts of a statue of John Lennon in Central Park were never realized after his death. The Central Park Conservancy and Yoko Ono agreed instead to create a lovely memorial landscape centered on the Imagine paving at Strawberry Fields. This understated memorial has been a huge success with New Yorkers and tourists alike.

Are there going to be new types of public art in the city anytime soon? I was really hoping to see something new like a new stone statue in a park. That would really be beautiful. Or maybe a fountain, a wishing well? And lights could be turned on in the night to make it a free water show.

— Posted by Ameena

One new project about to open is the memorial to Frederick Douglass at Frederick Douglass Circle, Central Park West at 110th Street. The memorial includes a bronze statue of Douglass by Gabriel Koren as well as a fountain and decorative paving that recalls African-American quilt patterns by Algernon Miller.

Other fountains recently opened include the reconstructed fountain at Washington Square Park, relocated to align with the Washington Arch, and a delightfully informal fountain at the Battery Bosque in the Battery at the tip of Manhattan; it is beautifully lighted at night as designed by Linnaea Tillet.

Do you know the status of the Brooklyn Bridge anchorage in Brooklyn? I realize that Creative Time controlled activities in the space, so they may be the ones to ask, but perhaps you can comment.

— Posted by cjm

All I know is that Creative Time discontinued their activities there in 2001 due to security concerns of the city. The closest thing recently was the Waterfalls installation by Olafur Eliasson for the Public Art Fund on the river side of the Brooklyn Bridge anchorage. There is a possibility of future art installations on the Brooklyn side of the Manhattan Bridge.

Public art is often simply viewed as pretty (or not) objects on sidewalks and in parks. Can you provide examples of public art programs that encourage viewers to interact with the artwork and/ or learn more about art in general?

— Posted by Lise Ragbir

The Public Art Fund has organized numerous interactive installations in New York City in the last few years. One of my favorites was Anish Kapoor's "Sky Mirror," hosted by Tishman Speyer at Rockefeller Center in 2006. As described in Public Art New York, passers-by could see not only themselves reflected in context in the mirror facing Fifth Avenue, but also the buildings of Rockefeller Center reflected in the side of the mirror facing west.

Another wonderful interactive piece sponsored by the Public Art Fund was Dan Graham's "Bisected Triangle," installed in Madison Square Park in 2002; visitors could walk into the glass pavilion to experience the changing quality of reflectivity and opacity of the glass and to enjoy views out to the park.

I'm curious about the copy of Robert Indiana's "LOVE" in Midtown. What is the history behind it?

— Posted by Mike

I, too, would like to know more of the history of how the Indiana piece came to be installed on Avenue of the Americas, since so many variants of "LOVE" have been installed around the country and the world. The plaque on the base of this bright red and blue version says it was installed courtesy of Simon Salama-Caro in 1999. The site is, of course, right around the corner from the Museum of Modern Art, which commissioned the original Christmas card for which Mr. Indiana designed the "LOVE" logo in 1966.