

Today's "Public Art"

Rarely Public, Rarely Art

by Michelle Marder Kamhi

"One senses that public art is gathering new momentum daily and receiving such significant acceptance that neither party politics nor economic recession nor our serious energy and environmental problems can reverse the trend." That sanguine prophesy was issued nearly a decade ago by Professor Sam Hunter—of the Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University—in the Preface to Donald W. Thalacker's *The Place of Art in the World of Architecture*. Thalacker was then, and still is, director of the federal "Art-in-Architecture" program, begun in the early 1960s to incorporate the fine arts into new government building projects. His book documents the often stormy history of works commissioned under the program between 1972 and 1979—works such as Claes Oldenburg's 100-foot-high steel-lattice-work *Batcolumn* (shaped like a baseball bat) in front of the Social Security Administration building in Chicago; and George Sugarman's *Baltimore Federal*, an expansive, multicolored metal construction, part of which roughly resembles a gigantic ornate bathing cap.

Hunter, who teaches, writes, and consults frequently on this subject, was half right. In one sense, "public art" programs are gathering momentum: government-funded projects for so-called art in public places have proliferated in the past decade, as state and local agencies across the country have followed the federal lead in advocating (sometimes mandating) that a percentage—generally one per cent—of new construction and major renovation costs for public buildings be allocated to art. Contrary to Hunter's prophesy, however, "significant" public acceptance of the products of such allocations seems no closer now than ten, or twenty, years ago.

Though contemporary "public art" (corporate-sponsored as well as government-funded) is increasingly conspicuous in America's cities, much of it is either ignored or rejected by the majority of the public, including more than a few professionals and intellectuals outside the current art establishment. Federal judges, for example, were among the most outspoken critics of two major Art-in-Architecture projects: Sugarman's "sculpture" for Federal Courthouse Plaza in Baltimore, and "Minimalist sculptor" Richard

Serra's now notorious *Tilted Arc* in New York City. One judge who testified against the Serra piece (Paul P. Rao, of the U.S. Court of International Trade) declared:

If the *Tilted Arc* ever came before our court, and I was called upon to write an opinion, I would be obliged to state that it is not a work of art.

(Judge Rao's brief testimony did not indicate the reasoning behind his judgment, and an in-depth analysis of the nature of art cannot in any case be undertaken within the scope of this article; but it may suffice to say here that *Tilted Arc*—like any abstract work—is not art, in part because it does not, indeed cannot, communicate, outside explication notwithstanding, fundamental human values, or ideas.)

A number of academics, too, have rejected modernist works, as university campuses have become the frequent "beneficiaries" of "public art" programs. At Western Washington University, for example, a symposium organized in the spring of 1986 on the subject of Western's "world-class" collection of contemporary "sculpture" drew seven essentially negative assessments (out of eight) by faculty participants from various humanistic disciplines, including music, philosophy, foreign languages, liberal studies, and—most remarkably, in view of today's almost monolithic art establishment—art and art history. Like the federal judge quoted above, these academics questioned, directly or implicitly, whether the works under discussion are indeed art at all. One of the seven critical papers—by Thomas Schlotterback, the maverick professor of art and art history who co-organized the event—was the basis for *Two Public Monuments a Century Apart* in this issue.

Toward a "Humanizing" Effect

The principal federal influence on today's "public art" projects is through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), America's foremost arts agency, created by act of Congress in 1965. By way of its own extensive "Art in Public Places" grant-making program and as an advisory body to the sizable Art-in-Architecture program of the General Services Administration (GSA), which manages federal facilities, the NEA has overseen many hundreds of

