

The Kudzu Effect (or: The Rise of a New Academy)

By Joyce Kozloff

THE TEN MOST POPULAR PUBLIC ART PROJECTS IN THE '90S:

1. *It's a Small World*

A mural depicting a rainbow coalition of larger-than-life smiling faces dominates the space. Below it are texts, in which ordinary people, as well as community leaders, tell their stories in different languages and handwritings; these same stories reverberate throughout the edifice in the sounds of recorded voices. Many of storytellers have overcome adversity (abuse, homelessness, AIDS). Objects of personal meaning to each of them are encased in apertures in the adjacent walls.

2. *Junior High School Science Project*

The site rests over a gravel pit. The artist has researched the origins of gravel. There is a large mound of it in the space, as well as didactic signage explaining gravel's historic and cultural significance. The graphics mimic functional signs already located throughout the building.

3. *Junior High School Geography Project*

There is a terrazzo map on the floor, depicting the place where we stand. An arrow points to our exact intersection, because one cannot assume that people know how they got there. There is a clock indicating what time it is, followed by a series of clocks showing what time it is everywhere in the world. Additionally, *trompe l'oeil* murals represent this street as it once appeared before all the landmark buildings were destroyed.

4. *The Artist/Architect Collaboration (also known as The Two'fer)*

The artist has designed light fixtures, gates, furniture, paving, etc., using all the same industrial materials and color palette insisted upon by the architects. Some elements are made of clear, transparent plastics, so as not to intrude on anyone's design sensibilities or run the risk of being labeled signature-style art.

5. *Kids "R" Us*

The artist has gone into the local schools and invited hundreds of children of maximum ethnic diversity to draw a picture of their neighborhood or family. These drawings are then fabricated on ceramic tile or baked enamel, depending on the budget, and installed in a subway station with the kids' names prominently displayed nearby. A press conference is called, and all the children are invited.

6. *Heal the Earth Project*

The artist is reclaiming a neglected urban site, recycling sewage, planting an indigenous forest, recreating a lost wetland, protecting endangered species, irrigating local gardens, purifying the air, feeding the community, and saving the whales.

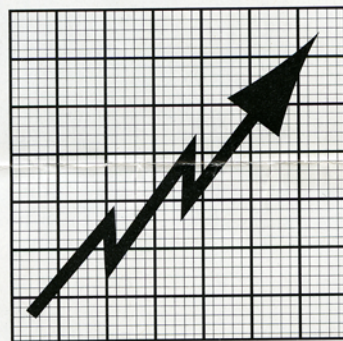
7. *The Artist/Writer Collaboration*

Inspirational poetry is woven into the sidewalk, fences, doorways, telephone poles, lamp posts, and window boxes of a grim municipal building. Its inner sanctums are graced by oversized antique photographs evoking memories that will encourage civic pride and a timeline of the community's history instructs visitors about their past.

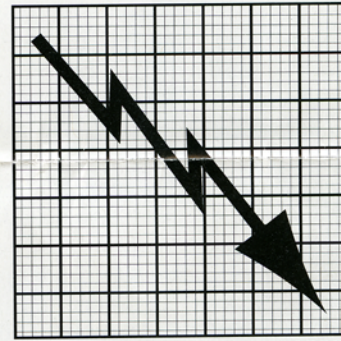
8. *The New Age Observatory (also known as Son et Lumière)*

This is a structure that mirrors and reflects the cosmos. The curved benches built into its wall serve as a mini-

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amphitheater so shamans and goddess worshippers can gather for the solstice. Outside is a magical array of topiary tarot card figures perched above a field of tinkling and gyrating whirligigs, created by regional outsider artists.

9. *Transgressions and Interventions*

Large cryptic words or phrases on bus shelters, billboards, electronic sign systems, etc., exhort and mystify their audience. Some of these words take the form of three-dimensional objects doubling as uncomfortable seating and can best be read in aerial photographs taken to document the artwork.

10. *Triumphal Arch to Nowhere and Domestic Obelisk*

The artist wishes to revive and honor traditional forms, but without their unnecessary architectural function and unpleasant imperial content. Stage I, Gates, will include a modest brick arch at the threshold of a parking lot, a more substantial concrete one over the neighborhood playground, and a giant steel structure across the interstate highway. During Stage II, Markers,

obelisks will appear in government headquarters, the veterans' burial ground, various corporate lobbies, and a shopping mall. The artist will not determine these pieces' final design specifics until a program of public seminars is conducted on the subject.

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How is it that projects like these have emerged, like kudzu, across the country, executed seemingly independently, by an array of different artists? Is it only because certain ideas are in the air at a given moment? Are there a finite number of logical solutions to the problems proposed by public art? Is it impossible to get a quirky or independent thought through a committee? Or perhaps that in a decentralized discipline with few organs of communication, artists newly entering the field are susceptible to suggestions from veteran art administrators, who attend conferences and know what works?

All of us are painfully aware that visual arts organizations are besieged, nationally and locally, by right-wing fundamentalists looking for an excuse to defund them. In these times, we want to be supportive and positive, but we must also remain self-critical. Who among us has not created, or at least proposed, a variant on one or more these 10 projects? For an older artist, it is at best a dubious distinction to have

become a pioneer of clichés. Certainly we can all recall and imagine wonderful works espousing any of the sentiments I have been satirizing, but good ideas and intentions are not art, and even the best ideas seem dumb when presented as literal, untransformed data.

Are we trying so hard not to offend or provoke that our only goal has become education? Is this why so many pieces seem to be pandering and talking down? Maybe our communities expect more and deserve better, and possibly art doesn't always have to feel so good, anyway. If we respect and trust ourselves as artists, we will be more able to make challenging, complex, and moving works: There is a difference between public relations and public art.

These thoughts evolved, in part, out of conversations with the following friends: Mary Miss, Tamara Thomas, Nina Yankowitz, Joyce Pomeroy Schwartz, Erika Rothenberg, Alexis Smith, and Jody Pinto.

Joyce Kozloff is a public and private artist living in New York.