

# Mobile Monuments: The Art and Politics of Placing Pedestals

## William Busta

In one part of the exhibition *Urban Evidence: Contemporary Artists Reveal Cleveland* (1996), Joseph Kossuth had small stone plates created, each engraved with names and dates. Without explanatory text, visitors were free to ignore these as they were scattered around the walls of the Cleveland Museum of Art's lobby, or they could try to puzzle it out. And it was indeed a puzzle, for while some of the names were familiar, the dates did not correlate to the lives of the individuals. Reasonably, the viewer could assume a relationship between names and dates - and the tension and the space of verifying that assumption was in large part the content of the work of art. With fortune, there are catalogs to museum exhibitions and it explained that the names were the names of people who had been memorialized in public sculpture in Cleveland; the dates were the dates that the sculpture was dedicated.

At first this relationship, this placement in time might seem arbitrary or inconsequential, because it creates a set of linkages outside the lives of the historical figures. Upon reflection, however, it seems critical, for it links individuals to points in time when the historical figures loomed largest, or at least seemed most useful. This analysis elevates the importance of the social and political function of these monuments at the expense of the aesthetic. For most, a visual review confirms.

As part of the apparatus of contemporary municipal government, formal entities such as a City Planning Commission and Design Review Commission have roles which guard the keys to gates of construction sites. But decisions about the placement of public monuments are actually the result of a more complex interplay, involving the interests of developers, civic foundations, community interest groups, city council, and the mayor's office. Usually the formal review process mediates real competing interests, but choices can be made to satisfy persistent individuals who have the capability to exercise or call upon political power.

Of many distinctions that might be made between works of art and public monuments (though a single structure or object might be both), it is the tendency of monuments to be based upon formula - to fulfill specific expectations; and the ambition of works of art to contest public expectation. For monuments, the event or individual to be memorialized is more important than the physical monument - the monument is a public, concrete expression to assert in the cityscape, preserving memory. The work of art, if successful, should modify the viewer's visual expectations, teaching something about the way we see and the way that we can possibly see.

If we live in a time when, at construction, structures are calculated as "50-year buildings" or "100-year-buildings," the presumptions of public monuments and public art confound construction standards. With few exceptions, their presumption is permanency—an insolence which insults historical process and the forces of nature. In conformity, they are built with the intent to last—and the construction costs reflect that intent. And having function, but no practical use, it usually takes extraordinary effort and commitment to secure funds. Additionally, these objects and structures are placed in public space, usually with the attendant expectation that public funds will be utilized to maintain the space, if not the monument. These necessities galvanize a variety of public and private interests, which sometimes conflict. Interestingly, decisions are more often made through attrition, rather than consensus, with action delayed until contestants drop their concerns. It often takes years, and sometimes decades.

To illustrate this process in Cleveland, this presentation will focus upon six monuments and sculptures, each of which has been sited with specific care and each of which has moved with changes in public culture: the *Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry Monument* by William Walcutt, 1860 (Cleveland's first and most mobile monument); *Tom L. Johnson Monument* by Herman Matzen, 1915; *Tension Arches* by Athena Tacha, 1976; *Global Flight* by Clarence VanDuzer, 1976; *Free Stamp* by Claes Oldenberg and Coosje van Bruggen, 1991; and the *Cleveland Firefighters Monument* by Luis Jimenez, yet to be built.

*Free Stamp* and *Tension Arches* are works of art, without commemorative function, but each conceived and commissioned as public amenity. The *Perry Monument* and *Tom L. Johnson Monument* had, as pri-

mary impulse, to celebrate public heroes. *Global Flight* and the *Firefighter's Monument* have the expectations of monument as well as art.

However extensive and powerful their original constituency, and whatever their original impulse, the changing concerns of the community in which they are situated challenge the permanence of monuments by making on-going decisions about their maintenance and about their rights to retain position in public view. Affecting these decisions are two principal factors - one which might be expected; and the other, surprising. First, if the principal group which initiated the monument has continuity, as with the support of armed forces veterans for the monuments of previous wars, then the monuments have support for continued claims upon the public purse and space. But secondarily, it is the visual interest of the monument or sculpture itself that has a capacity to maintain attention. This does not necessarily mean the pieces with the highest aesthetic attainment, but those which have had a unique capacity to capture the attention and affection of a public.