

'Art for All'

By April Kingsley

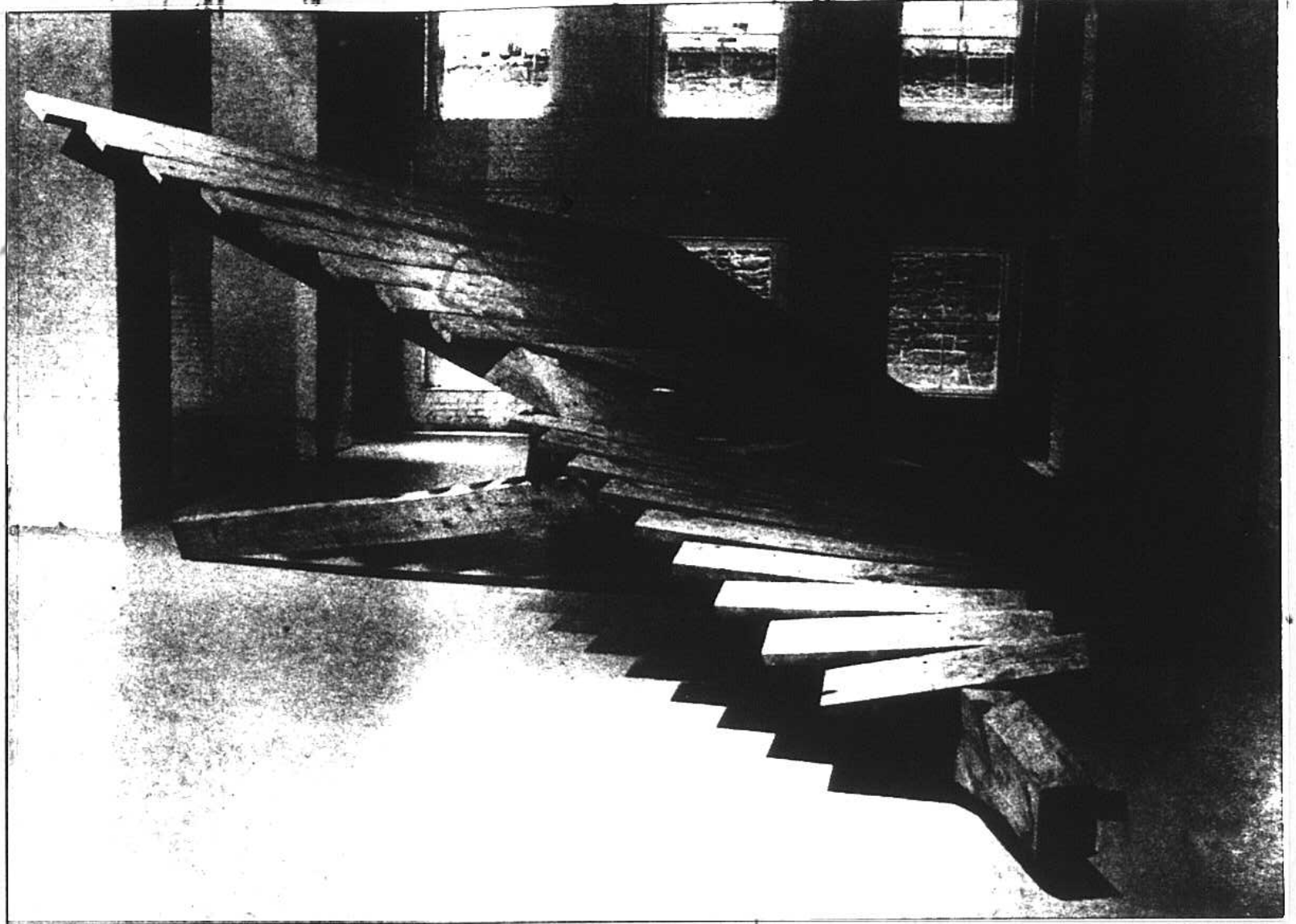
In any European city, art is just around the corner. Now we're the center of the art world, but you'd never know that from looking at what's on view in our street. We have a smattering of peeling "Painted City Walls" and scattered sculptures too rare to seem like a presence and usually too small not to be dwarfed by their sites. New Yorkers have to make special efforts to see art, so art is seen outside an everyday real-life context.

Perhaps our new mayor will change all this, as Richard Goldstein thinks he will, but he'll have to find ways of tapping the artists directly, eliminating the bureaucratic claptrap that has slowed or stopped our progress in the past. For starters, the city could organize a rental system for large-scale sculpture—both for publicly owned sites and private ones—serving as a go-between for artist and corporation. Let the artist receive a rental fee for the work, let it be moved, maintained, and insured at public (or foundation) expense, and everyone will benefit. Eventual purchase by the city or a business would depend on the quality of the work and on its placement, which will be easier to assess through familiarity.

Ronald Bladen, one of the very best sculptors in the world today, is a classic case in point. None of his pieces is on view anywhere in the city (though they are in other cities) and he's been forced out of his studio by the sheer accumulated mass of work which could be put on display. Bladen works at full scale, eschewing models or mock-ups—which is the best way to deal seriously with urban sites if you work abstractly—but this is a handicap, given the physical problems of studio space. Making more studio space available is only part of the solution; we need his art available to us as well.

Fritz Bultman, whose sculpture is not publicly displayed in the city either, thinks we should have artist-designed fountains or watering places where Sunday-afternoon car washing could be turned into an aesthetic experience. Instead, we just paint the hydrants we use for that purpose. Who even notices, much less uses, the huge geyser fountain in the middle of the East River except the rich people in river's edge apartments? Bultman's idea is not only practical but open to all kinds of interpretations. In order to see Bultman's work—he draws, paints, and does collages as well as sculpture—you must go inside a museum or gallery despite the fact that he sculpts in the relatively permanent material of bronze. (His current show of figural drawings at the Landmark Gallery, 469 Broome Street, to December 17, is exquisite.)

Sculpture by Sal Romano—whose recent show at the Max Hutchinson Gallery should have raised the consciousness of every major contractor and architect in the city to the possibilities for making a bland lobby or a waste-space plaza into an experience—can only be seen outside the city, at Storm King (near Bear Mountain, open only in the summer) and at Wave Hill in the Bronx (675 West 252nd Street, 549-2055). About 20 pieces are placed around the Wave Hill grounds—approximately half of which are on loan from the Hirshhorn Collection. Romano's, a shallow pool inexplicably crowded with waterlilies, is the only one made for the site. The work



Tom Doyle's *Tullahoma* in "Sculpture Yesterday/Today"

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consists of three blue uprights and two floating white discs. The electric blue serves as a perfect foil for the nature colors all around, and the moving discs are a subtle surprise. Only two pieces are located on the breathtaking Hudson River view side of the park—Isaac Witkin's relatively timid but billowy steel piece, and Ned Smyth's lyrical *Arcade* of interlocking concrete lotus columns. Mark di Suvero's *Pasta* is unusually chunky and curvilinear. Otherwise, the pompous Henry Moore, cheerful Alexander Calder, wispy (broken) George Rickey, compactly tense Kenneth Snelson, baroque George Sugarman, mild-mannered Isamu Noguchi, slender Chuck Ginnever, two madly agitated Willem de Koonings, witty William King, and boring, empty Tony Rosenthal are all pieces you might expect to see, and see looking the way they do. The surprise is Richard Hunt's *Sparrow Hill Incline and Extension*, a powerful, massive hulk of cor-ten in a tense crouch, spewing forth organic streams of steel.

The seeming ubiquity of Tony Rosenthal in these shows or installations as well as in the city—three permanent pieces and now a temporary installation of *Hammarskjöld* on the plaza of that name—is worth a comment. Rosenthal's recent cor-ten pseudo-beams, square in section, are assembled into a piece on the spot, but they are no less hollow or meaninglessly

propped than his early work, like the cube on its point in Astor Place. His blandness, his insensitivity to scale or detail, his lack of feeling for sculptural mass or weightiness, is dispiriting. He represents what's wrong with the public art here, the way Bladen represents what could be right.

There needs to be more difference between the sculptured object and the surrounding architecture for an abstract piece to read clearly in an urban setting. If the piece is figurative or derived from real life, like a Claes Oldenburg Popsicle, then it has built-in scale and differentness. To seem monumental it need only be enlarged, as Oldenburg and King clearly understand. If the piece speaks of nature, like Jean Dubuffet's tree on the Chase Manhattan Plaza, it's easy to hear it above the cacophony of competing grids. To "hear" an abstract sculpture—which speaks of the machined and the architectural to begin with—it has to be one or more of the following: huge, asymmetrical, fully 3-D, energetic, diagonally axial, openly formed, weighty, implying movement, implying stability, and finely tuned in scale with a wide range of detailing from large to small. The best abstract sculptures permanently in urban settings (though not in ours) have been created by Alexander Calder, Barnett Newman, Robert Murray, Tony Smith, Ronald Bladen, and Mark di Suvero. The artists I mentioned earlier would also do wonderful outdoor urban works, as would Tom Doyle, Caspar Henselman, Alice Aycock, and Alexander Lieberman, among others.

The various exhibitions at the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn, Long Island (516-484-9333) prove that just about any kind of sculpture looks good out in nature, as long as it has a strong gestalt. Both site-dependent and movable object work is shown, but it is the former that remains on view for the most part, between shows. Until its recent (and lamentable) removal, Alice Aycock's *Wooden Posts Surrounded by Fire Pits* was best example of this kind of sculpture within a reasonable distance of the city. A maze of pitch-coated upright logs encircled by fire pits lit only on special occasions, it evoked visions of primitive ritual that could have struck responsive chords in the minds of many New Yorkers had it been erected in Central Park. Non-art connotations are also carried by Alice Adams' *Charlie's House* located in the rose garden, and Tom

Doyle's *Pittsburgh Landing*, both leftovers from last summer's outdoor show called "Wood." Adams's dream house for child's play deliberately undercuts our notions of architecture by being unfloored and incompletely walled, while Doyle's piece thrusts out in space from the side of a steep ravine like a ship's prow breaking through a wave.

Doyle's *Tullahoma* walks away with the "Today" section of the "Sculpture Yesterday/Today" show at Sculpture Now, Inc., 142 Greene Street (continuing indefinitely). The "Yesterday" part of the show includes early works by Doyle, Mark di Suvero, Peter Forakis, and Chuck Ginnever, each of whom also has one major piece in the lower gallery "Today" section. All four sculptures fairly burst in their enclosed spaces, crying out for the urban spaces that cry out for them. Doyle's ecstatic work suffers its indoor location best because of its inviting wooden surface texture and warm natural coloring. Its detailing rewards a close encounter. The Forakis seems flat, the di Suvero labored and puffy, and the Ginnever is one of his suspended sheet-steel pieces that seem unnecessarily precarious, but all would be better judged in an outdoor setting.

Public sculpture should benefit, not threaten, its passing audience. Carl Andre's "rock garden" in downtown Hartford does that, and so does Dan Flavin's DIA Art Foundation-sponsored *Lighting the Platforms of Tracks 18-19, 39-40, 41-42* in Grand Central Station, a permanent installation. Neither artist had to compromise his personal variation on a Minimalist aesthetic to do so. Flavin replaced the sickly yellowish overhead fluorescent tubes with higher intensity cool-white ones, two for one, then flanked them above with single lines of pink and yellow, one on each side. The configuration is, in section, similar to that of his *Monuments to Vladimir Tatlin*, legendary in Russia for his commitment to socially utilitarian art. Only the initiated would "get" that reference, or those to Platonism (the light of knowledge) and religion ("He shall light our way", etc.), or notice that the tracks Flavin chose to light (39-42) are right by the elevator to the Grand Central Galleries (where so many great early American masters showed) and (18-20) by a high-voltage power unit. Even without any sign to tell the commuter about the art, it still has its effect.