

## A conversation with Jill Manton and Susan Pontious of the San Francisco Art Commission

By Meredith Tromble

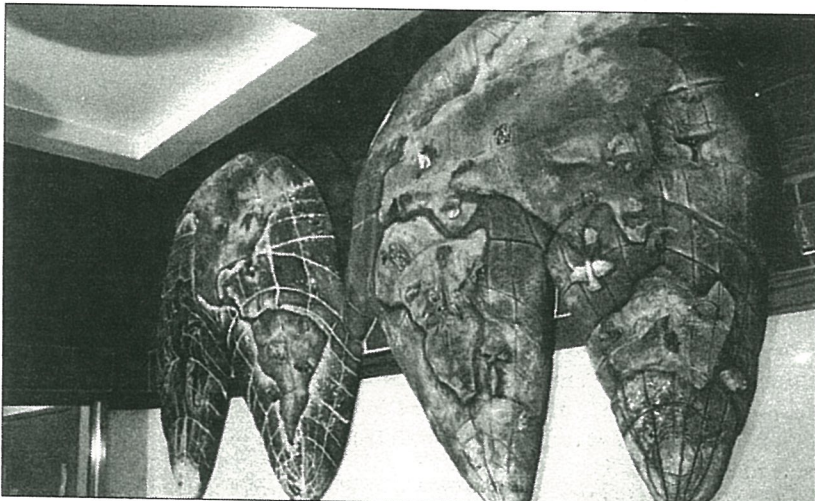
**T**he San Francisco Art Commission is a highly visible patron of contemporary sculpture. Some recent commissions include works by Alice Aycock, Nayland Blake, and Ann Hamilton with Ann Chamberlain, which are being installed at the new San Francisco Public Library at Civic Center. Jill Manton, who has been with the Art Commission since 1983, is Director of the Public Art Program. Susan Pontious is a Curator and Project Manager. Both were trained in studio art, Manton as a photographer and Pontious as a painter.

**Artweek** *The commissions for the new library demonstrate an adventurous approach to public sculpture. How has the direction of the Art Commission developed over the years?*

**Jill Manton** Typically public art and sculpture were synonymous. Public art meant large di Suveros or Calder. Today, the term "public art" applies to many different kinds of artistic expression. In 1988, we began a project that took the Art Commission on a new path, which was Ned Kahn's greenhouse at the San Bruno County Jail. Kahn talked to the sheriff, and went into the jail to talk to the inmates and guards, and he just got depressed. He thought there was nothing he could contribute. Then he learned about their organic gardening program, which was operating at only half its potential level of productivity because the greenhouse was almost life threatening—you'd walk in and panes of glass might fall on you. Ned proposed a new state-of-the-art greenhouse as his work. Nothing except the use of his magical dichroic glass and his mist sculptures, which feed the plants, is unusual for a greenhouse. It's a beautiful greenhouse, certainly, but was it a work of art? The commission and the sheriff decided that it was.

**Susan Pontious** That's the main evolution we've seen. Artists increasingly are taking an environmental

Arthur Gonzalez, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 1996, concrete and ceramic sculpture, at the Taraval Police Station, San Francisco. Commissioned by the San Francisco Art Commission.



Scott Donahue, *Kate, Alan, Javier, Ting Ting, Sloanie*, 1996, steel, at the Taraval Police Station, San Francisco. Commissioned by the San Francisco Art Commission.

approach, as well. They try to influence a greater aspect of the space, rather than just fill the "x" on the plan where the art goes. When we go into a project, we ask what the overall goal is. We're investing millions of dollars to some end. What is that goal and how can the artist be a part of it?

**JM** But sometimes an independent sculpture is still the best solution. The site where we recently installed a new Mark di Suvero sculpture was identified in the master plan as a gateway, which needed an announcement.

**AW** *Do economic pressures work against large-scale public sculpture?*

**JM** A sculpture by Mark di Suvero that's half the size of the one on our waterfront site can sell for over a million dollars. But he wanted our project, even though the budget was only a quarter of a million. I asked him if the fee covered all his expenses, the steel and cranes and his crew, welding inspections, bonds, insurance. When he thought about it, he realized that his expenses just equalled the amount of money he got. He never got any money for his own time.

**SP** There are two reasons artists don't make a lot of money. They're working on a bigger, more complex scale, so they're trying to make the dollars go farther. And the projects are so complicated that a lot of things can go wrong. You have to be realistic about budgeting for all those eventualities.

**JM** Take Ray Beldner's project on Ocean Beach. He proposed five sculptures of characters from Playland, with a project budget of \$50,000.

He made a proposal for a certain material, then the Commission asked him to change the material.

**SP** It shows how an artist may have to shift gears. He originally proposed that the piece be made in Lexan. But that's not a material you can put in a public site because it's easily scratched.

**JM** He could have come back and said that the steel is more expensive, that he'd only do four sculptures instead of five, but he didn't. Most of the people we work with put two hundred percent into the project in terms of time and effort. They go way above and beyond what we can pay for.

**AW** *Beldner's piece is on a site formerly occupied by an amusement park*

*called Playland, which is remembered fondly by many people who grew up in San Francisco. His ghostlike renditions of familiar Playland characters serve one of the traditional functions of public sculpture, commemoration.*

**SP** He tapped into a whole community of people who are keeping the memory of Playland alive. They buried a time capsule and had a groundbreaking and a dedication. It was a very contemporary response to commemoration.

**JM** It puts a "there" there. Once the site was Playland and then it became a lot next to a Muni parking area. Now he's given something back.

**AW** *What other problems are faced by sculptors working for the public?*

**JM** You have to think about how compatible the work will be with the activities in a public environment. You can't dictate or even predict how the public will use your work of art. A good case in point is the Promenade ribbon sculpture along the Embarcadero. We've had a tremendous issue going on with the skateboarders. They say—and I'm coming around to an understanding of their position—that they enjoy the piece more than anyone else. They use it and love it on a daily basis ...

**SP** Love it to death ...

**JM** That's right. They chip the concrete. It creates all sorts of problems. Do we want it to always look as pristine and pure as it does in the photographs that were taken just after it was completed? Sometimes use and enjoyment are detrimental to the artwork. It's a real challenge to create an urban space as a work of art instead of bringing an artwork to a public space.

**AW** *What social pressures are driving this move towards urban space as art?*

**JM** Space is at a premium. No one has room any more. A sculpture of scale commands a certain space and precludes other activities from happening there. And most city departments now want to have the flexibility to change a program. For example, the Water Department was no longer happy with the lobby sculpture at their Millbrae Facility. It was quite large and it did dominate the lobby. They said people kept walking into it, and so they put orange cones around it.

**AW** *Typical. Do you have a graveyard for unwanted public sculpture?*

**JM** No, but in our contracts, we now have to add that we can't guarantee a sacrosanct space. When the Embarcadero Freeway came down, there was a lot of interest in dismantling the Vaillancourt Fountain, which many people felt was designed as a backdrop to the freeway. They felt that besides losing its context, it would interfere with the development of designs for other activities. But it's going to remain. Because of the laws, we can't touch the sculpture. And the Art Commission has to approve the removal and destruction of a work of art. Even if it's not exactly something that we would define as a work of public art today, it would be very awkward for the commission to sanctify the destruction of a work of art.

Meredith Tromble is a painter based in the Bay Area and a contributing editor to *Artweek*. She also is a commentator on "West Coast Live," an internationally syndicated public radio program.