

inclusion of many art historians, are idea- and issue-oriented. But just as the CAA conferences are job fairs for unemployed artists and art historians in search of academic employment, so too did the sculpture conference carry its own economic agenda: this was the place where all those people who fund, administer and execute large-scale outdoor sculpture (corporate or public, there isn't much difference anymore) engage in their networking, and even now, big bucks are available for big work, especially if it is soft enough (but not too soft) on the political

front and doesn't demand too much from architects and project directors.

Even savvy, issue-oriented presenters such as Amalia Mesa-Bains and Suzanne Lacy were surprisingly equivocal about the political content of their own work, at least in relationship to its other, poetic aspects, which is not to say that their presentations in some way "sold out" the aspirations of a conceptual, politically oriented public art, only that they agreed that such projects needed to announce themselves as "art" rather than as something

more didactic. Still, one quote from the proceedings seemed to summarize the entire week. From a session devoted to the role of the figure in contemporary sculpture, Elizabeth King announced that "process is what saved us from the poverty of our intentions." Amen. ■

The Fifteenth International Sculpture Conference was held August 13-21 at Hotel Nikko, San Francisco, and a number of other sites in the Bay Area, including galleries, studios and museums.

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## A conversation with Peter Richards, director of Art Programs at the Exploratorium, San Francisco

BY MEREDITH TROMBLE

In 1986, Peter Richards, with George Gonzales, installed *Wave Organ* along the shoreline of the Marina, and it soon became one of the most popular public artworks in the history of San Francisco. The piece, which works in concert with the tidal motion of San Francisco Bay, draws people of all ages to the site, and Richards, who is director of Art Programs at the nearby Exploratorium, stops by regularly to clean and maintain it. He hopes to work with the National Park Service to create public artworks that complement the environmental education goals of the new Presidio park. Meanwhile, the science museum's use of artists to design exhibits was pioneered by Richards, who has been running the artists-in-residence program there

bulldozed.

**AW** When you think of the best public artworks you've seen, have you noticed an ingredient that they have in common?

**PR** Good public art is no different from good art. Like all good art, good public art transports you, takes you somewhere else.

**AW** Many public artworks involve collaboration with other professionals, like architects or landscape architects. What does an artist bring to a collaborative project?

**PR** Several things. George Hargreaves, the landscape architect, says that he likes to work with artists because they change the expectations of a client, which allows him to be more experimental. When you put an artist on the team, people's expectations change.

Artists are not trained to do things in any specific way. So they're likely to come up with a solution to a problem that people who are trained to do something in a specific way wouldn't think of. It gets exciting when these weird

solutions start bouncing around.

I also think good public artists are representatives of the public. They act as the eyes of the public, in a way.

**AW** You've said that to be a good public artist you have to become part of the public. What do you mean by that?

**PR** I don't know that artists have been a part of the

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public historically. The avant-garde artists separated themselves from the public, were critics of the public. Even Pop art can be thought of as a critique of the middle-class sensibility because it's the middle class that buys all this stuff. In return, the public thinks of the artist as a weird person who does weird things that don't have any relevance to their lives.

Good public artists can become allies of the public. They can listen to members of the public and work to create something that has meaning for them, that becomes theirs. If you're going to operate in public, you have to become part of the community. That's one of the problems I have as a public artist going to some

other community, trying to become part of it but knowing that I've only got a limited time to do this.

**AW** Is participation in the community important enough that a commissioning agency should give preference to an artist from within the community?

**PR** No. It's important to bring people in from outside. If you don't, you become insular. On the other hand, you must support people locally. And it's important to support artist-generated projects. More often it's the case that the art commission has X amount of dollars to spend in conjunction with a construction project. You try to find someone who can relate to that site and do something sensible. There aren't many places you can go to as an artist and say, "I have this idea, will you help me realize it?" But those are often the most interesting projects.

**AW** When you go to another community to make a piece, how do you go about becoming part of that community?

**PR** I try to identify something that resonates with them that's also interesting to me. I just did a temporary piece in a little town in France. They had a terrible flood there last fall that went over the top of a fifty-foot-high Roman bridge. The bridge is a symbol—every postcard of this town has the bridge in it. I like bridges and water and rivers, so that's where I focused my attention. People were freaked-out because it was a hundred-year flood and they'd had another hundred-year flood two years before. My piece addressed the rebuilding that must take place after a disaster, and how people try to figure out why these things happen. In a subtle way, I said that nature is giving you trouble because you've been ignoring nature. Their land use has changed dramatically in recent years and it's affected the way the water drains off the mountains and the way the river handles it.

**AW** What about presenting unpopular ideas? Should public art be confrontational with the public?

**PR** It is, whether it's intentional or not. I'll give you an example. Public Art Works [in San Rafael] commissioned a pair of artists, who interviewed kids from Marin County who had special stories, and the best stories were printed on shopping bags. One of the kids was an immigrant from Central America, who as a nine-year-old had walked through Mexico to join his mother here. His story was incredibly compelling. A conservative, anti-immigration group raised hell and threatened to boycott the store that was using the bags, so the store stopped using them. Then the papers got it and it worked its way through the local media to television and *Newsweek*. The upshot is, there's a group in Marin County forming a trust fund for this kid to ensure that he'll get a college education. That art uncovered both a nasty side and a very positive side of society. It wasn't intentionally confrontational, but it pressed a lot of different buttons for people. ■

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Peter Richards and George Gonzales, *Wave Organ*, San Francisco.

since 1974. He was among the speakers and panelists at the Fifteenth International Sculpture Conference in San Francisco.

**Artweek** What trends do you see in public art?

**Peter Richards** A lot of public art is being done in print right now. It's probably an economic thing as much as anything else, but in some ways it's good. Economic conditions are forcing people to be creative and find other ways of getting their concepts across.

**AW** The urban environment seems so full. Is it fair to say that a new aesthetic of public art is appearing, one that emphasizes the temporary over the permanent?

**PR** I, too, have a horror of a world filled with bad public art. Here at the Exploratorium, we have jammed in seven hundred exhibits, and in a way, we're a microcosm of a dream city that has too much public art. Art Park in New York had a wonderful art program. Every summer, ten or fifteen artists made these huge installations. Then, in September, they bulldozed everything. They bulldozed some fantastic things, but they cleaned the slate every year. I think it's something that should be talked about. I don't have any answers, though. I don't want my stuff