

Sculpture



February 1998 Vol. 17 No. 2 \$6 US \$1800 S8CAN

Judy Pfaff

Stone Sculpture

Public Art in Brazil

inSITE97

**Sculpture Conference
Registration Brochure**

Public Art in Brazil

A Dialogue

by Harriet F. Senie



Denise Milan, *O*

Ventra da Vida (Womb of Life), 1993. Quartz crystal, optic fiber, silicon, polyester resin, and glass, 160 x 150 cm.

Surprise is one of the most compelling factors of public art.

In São Paulo, public art “interventions” rarely last more than a month. On a more extensive scale, permanent public art has survived best in the subway system, a controlled environment that is constantly patrolled and apparently appreciated by its citizenry. Amazingly vulnerable works in all mediums remain intact and pristine. As of 1994, 76 works by 42 artists had been installed in 20 stations with plans for 20 more works in process.⁵

One of the most dramatic installations to date is Denise Milan’s 1993 *O Ventre da Vida (Womb of Life)* in the Clinicas Station in the concourse leading to a hospital complex, which was financed by a combination of private and public sources (Amsterdam Sauer, Rodhia, Blindex, and the government of the state of São Paulo). Openings in

the wall offer views of backlit quartz, a natural resource found in great abundance in Brazil. The crystals themselves are wondrous, mysterious “rocks” that have aged over time, according to a logic of their own, into fascinating structures. It is like peering into a magical cave, a reminder of nature’s miracles hidden from the harsh urban realities of the city, and is especially appropriate at a station where healing is on everyone’s mind.

Milan has become an important figure in public art in São Paulo, organizing international conferences, planning public art projects, and creating her own work. Since the late ’80s, she has realized permanent projects in Iberapuera Park, in the garden of the Museum of Contemporary Art, and in University City. She has become increasingly focused on natural rock crystals which she excavates and transforms into works of art, often with the assistance of her engineer husband, Ary Perez.⁶ For her, Brazil’s geological resources provide a language for public art that is at once unique to Brazil, yet universal in its appeal.

A different approach to expressing local references in a contemporary art idiom was adopted by Emanuel Araújo, the successful director of the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo as well as a practicing artist. An unlikely combination of Minimalist art forms painted black and red, and joined in Samba-like rhythms, his public art is permanently sited in several locations including Iberapuera Park and in front of the glitzy new Renaissance Hotel by the 60-year-old architect Ruy Ohtake.

Nelson Brissac has perhaps brought the most international focus to the issues confronting public art in São Paulo. Having curated two exhibitions focused on art and the city in flux, his current endeavor is based on an artist exchange with Berlin. While posing interesting problems and challenging

solutions, the degree of public involvement remains problematic.

The challenge of creating public art that addresses local culture and art world concerns is not unique to Brazil. The various strategies practiced in Rio, Brasília, Recife, Olinda, and São Paulo resonate with references to the recent history of public art in the United States. Issues of temporality versus permanence; integrating past and present, art and architecture; incorporating popular culture and public participation: all are regular topics at public art symposia. And Brazil is tackling them afresh.

In Rio the critical question for me was what is the relevance or sense of putting Minimalist sculpture in the midst of a city whose popular art is so vibrant and whose urban problems are so severe? The Texas-born painter John Nicholson, who has lived and worked in Rio for 20 years (and is an astute observer of the scene), was less concerned, observing that *Cariocas* were very tolerant and had a great desire to be up to date. In general that seemed to mean a local version of international contemporary art, with a time lapse of about 20 years after the U.S. variant.

Before rushing to judgment, remember that what is an authentic and appropriate work of public art for a particular site or city remains a problematic question with many possible answers.

Nicholson sees Rio and certain other Brazilian cities (Recife, Salvador, and Ouro Preto) as complex manifestations of public art with everything fundamental to it “be it Carnival, schools, soccer, Catholic processions moving statues of saints around the city, public poetry recitals in open-air markets, street theater and music, official architecture, or the Cariocan equivalent of the Watts Tower—Rio’s public art reality is the city itself.”