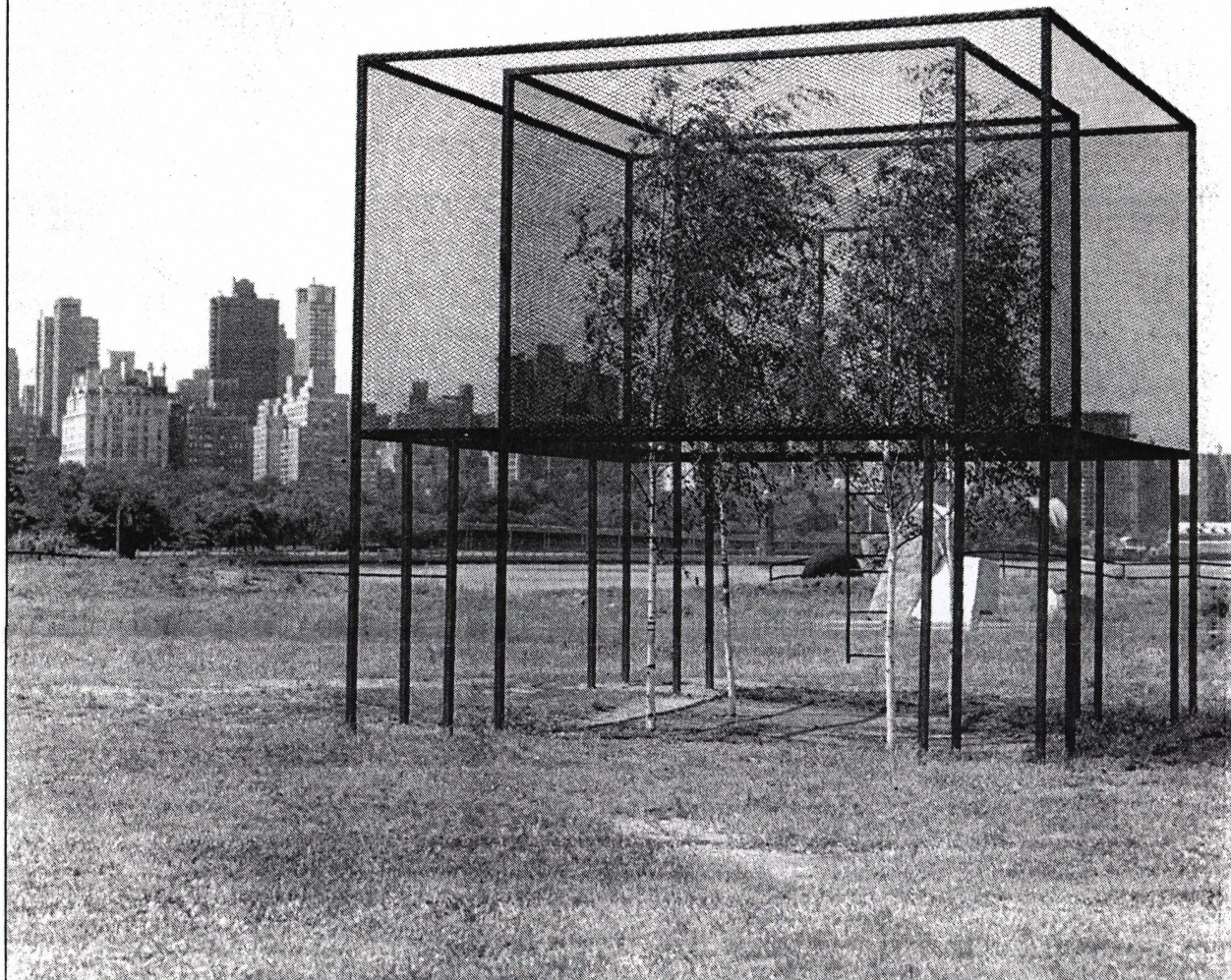


In Long Island City: Beth Galston's "Tree/House," at Socrates Sculpture Park.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Sculpture Under the Sky: Free, Daring and Soon Departed

By HOLLAND COTTER

A CENTURY ago, there were two kinds of outdoor sculpture in New York City: sculpture that commemorated and sculpture that decorated. American Presidents, Arctic explorers, even heroic huskies found themselves cast in bronze in Central Park. Nymphs and angels and animals of stone were de rigueur on fountains and facades across the city.

Things have changed with time. Heroism counts for less in our uncommemorative age and modernist architecture of glass and steel has little use for ornament. Yet, as even a glancing look at recent outdoor sculpture reveals, the form still flourishes. Detached from old uses, it is perhaps more marginal than of yore, but it is also more adventurous: as often abstract as figurative, politically critical rather than celebratory, confrontational rather than seductive, perfectly willing to trade permanence for ephemerality.

Adventurousness has liabilities. A few years ago, Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" in Federal Plaza in lower Manhattan was judged user-hostile and carted away. And much experimental outdoor work by younger artists has a tough time landing a venue. None of the pieces seen on this summer's outdoor sculpture tour will be staying where they are and a common outdoor exhibition format is the group show in which several disparate works are corraled on a kind of sculptural wildlife preserve. But even under these conditions, the work has at least the potential for vivifying the city through a street-level participation unknown to gallery-bound art.

Roosevelt Island is as good a place as any to begin an outdoor sculpture tour, though the work on hand is of mixed quality. For the second summer, Manhattan's nonprofit Sculpture Center has organ-

ized a group show here and installed it in the lower level of the Motorgate (the island's transportation complex), just under the Roosevelt Island Bridge to Queens.

Site may not be everything to sculpture, but it can mean a lot, and this exceptionally dour space tends to dim the already feeble wattage of this year's show. Luisa Caldwell tries to perk it up by covering four of the structure's columns with bright wallpaper, converting them to sculpture by default. Her 19th-century French black floral patterns set against a red ground have a certain pizzazz, but not nearly enough to warm their chilly surroundings.

Andrew Dunhill's steel assemblage of squat, interlocking stars and blocks is sensibly middle-of-the-road traditional. Satoru Takahashi's piece is more off-beat. He has created a bus stop shelter equipped with Plexiglas hemispheres that accommodate the viewer's head. From inside, they offer a distorted fish-eye view of the street. Moderately entertaining.

Only Itty Neuhaus's "Padded Landing" hints at the kind of sheer visual zaniness that outdoor work can shoot for. Ms. Neuhaus has encased an entire car frame in what looks like a colossal brioche and suspended it in a net from the Motorgate's high ceiling. Is it flying or being gently lowered to its parking space, cushioned against a fall? Whatever, it is a witty response to its garagelike setting and a reminder of the traffic streaming across the bridge overhead.

On the Queens side of that bridge is Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, where close to 40 works, large and small, sit on a scrappy 4.5-acre waterfront lot facing Manhattan. There's a relaxed, informal feeling to Socrates, with works under way, under repair, in storage and just completed sitting in

close proximity.

Some of the sculptures are by familiar artists in characteristic form. One of Chris MacDonald's overgrown wooden toys is here, as are three painted bronze figures by John Ahearn and a recent piece by the Socrates Park founder, Mark di Suvero. Mr. di Suvero was one of the pioneers of large-scale abstract outdoor sculpture 30-plus years ago, and his angled, stretching "Iroquois" exemplifies the enrallment with space over mass that was modernism's redefinition of the genre.

Of particular interest, though, are several pieces by less well-known artists constituting this summer's show, "International 1993/94." The works vary in style and in quality, but there are some common links. References to nature, for example, abound. The four cast-iron fish in Jack Pospisil's "Salmon Cycle" refer to the river; Beth Galston's metal treehouse incorporating birch saplings recalls the forests that once grew along the shores, while Gunilla Bandolin's key-shaped, brick-lined amphitheater leads directly into a mound of earth.

Win Knowlton's remarkable "East River Landscape" — a big rough disk of concrete with tires, bottles, duck decoys and other river detritus embedded in it — is a cautionary vision of what nature in the immediate locale has become under the assault of industry, while John Hock has transformed immense machine parts — including the barrel of a cement mixer — into a funny, blundering bouquet to industry itself.