

# Helwaser Gallery

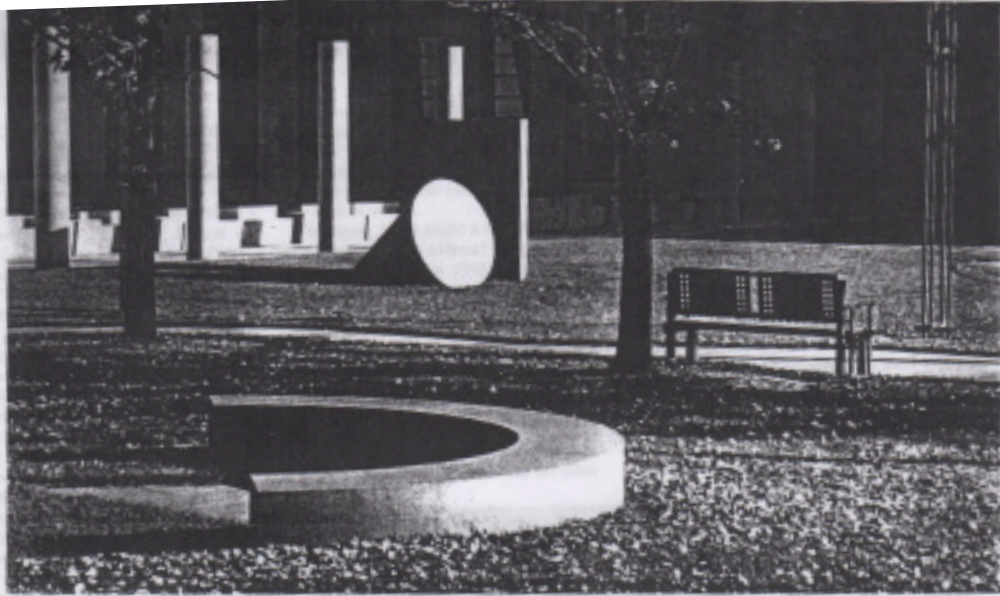
## Helwaser Gallery

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Flanagan, Regina, and Deborah Karasov. "That Beauty Problem-Why?" Public



Another view of East Capitol Plaza (photo: Regina Flanagan)

...revisory cannot be directly compared, at least the two can be seen as relevant to the same thing: all the values implied in the word public. Seen this way, the real question is not "Is beauty superficial?" but rather, "Is the artwork superficial?"

**Flanagan:** Facilitating social or moral seeing is a goal befitting public art. But while we are a predominantly visual culture, we also interpret most visual information as fact. Seeing is believing, until we stop to reflect upon what is presented, and multiple, often conflicting interpretations become apparent. But how often do we stop to reflect upon the meaning of all we see? Generally, we pause when something contradicts our expectations, is challenging or difficult, or transgressive and offensive.

I fear that we have become conditioned to using our sense of sight, in a way which may not help us develop the faculties necessary to understand public art. If we "read" visual imagery literally and superficially, expecting it to yield its message (information/fact) immediately, we may miss the meaning of all but the most didactic of artworks.

Are our environments too uncivil and egotistical, or are we? People have a physical as well as visual relationship to both their surroundings and each other. However, public spaces are often designed to discourage public gathering, and do not provide a hospitable context for human interaction, much less reflection or introspection. Perhaps other senses, as well as sight, need to become engaged so that we can first feel comfortable in public spaces. How might public space become more civil?

**Richard Fleischner's East Capitol Plaza,**

designed for a major civic space in St. Paul, MN, operates on several levels. The plaza, adjacent to the Minnesota Judicial Center across the street from the State Capitol, is first perceived spatially. Because of both the functional and visual complexity of the plaza, there is no one viewpoint from which the asymmetrical layout coalesces. Rather, the composition is unravelled as one navigates the space, following any of three possible routes across the plaza. The center of the composition is therefore the viewer, not an exact physical location within the plaza.

Fleischner has created a space that we compose using our senses and perceptions. Our response is complex because we have no special organ for registering a spatial sensation; the awareness is subconscious and takes place by the automatic registration of successive images. Spatial perception involves memories and experience, and not only visual sensations, but also sound, touch, and smell.

Jean-Pierre Vernant, in his studies of historical psychology, traces the evolution of the ancient Greek agora, traditionally a circular gathering place where citizens assembled to debate matters of common interest. Fleischner has used this historical form symbolizing free speech and debate in the amphitheater at the north end of the plaza, and the paved forecourt to the south. Although we may no longer know how to use the traditional public space as an effective political instrument, Fleischner has provided that option, as well as more informal uses.

**Karasov:** It is true that works like that of Fleischner are a good example of a sensory aesthetic that is more than visual. Actually,

the early definition of aesthetics never was necessarily limited to visual. In two volumes titled "Aesthetica" (1750-58), Alexander Baumgarten defined beauty as "phenomenal perfection." The significance for our discussion is that this early definition, like that used today, still placed predominant stress on apprehension through the senses.

Public art, I think, has a need to evoke more than an isolated subjective sense. It is not simply a matter of working outside the gallery context. Certainly artists should create what they want to: I am speaking here only of what I perceive as an important direction. Common or conflicting interpretations, meanings, resonances—these are the special insights artists can invoke from us and which conventional place designers do not. I could quibble with some of Fleischner's design choices. But the real problem is that it works primarily on an isolated subjective level—how do I respond to it, isolated from any other person or community. If interpretation is there, the language is vague to most.

One of the first principles of landscape ecology design is that of spatial and temporal extensiveness. By definition, a project is an intervention, maybe a disjunction or pause, within a larger process. Couldn't some public art be thought of in these terms? Couldn't beauty be a particular tool of intervention that leads us to read our lives and our environment in a different way?

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