

ic, public art usually doesn't work: either it displeases the public (or some angry, mobilized faction), or it simply is not good art.

Over the last dozen years, he says, most of the sculptures and other works of public art he has seen have fit the latter category. They are "arty but not too arty, playful but not too playful, colorful but not too colorful, and avant-garde but not too avant-garde." In short: mediocre. The "demi-sculptures" and "glorified benches" that have been materializing in America's public spaces are like "Fisher-Price toys for white-collar adults: you can walk on them, climb on them, play on them, and eat lunch on them," yet "for all their putatively progressive social trappings" they are "boring and even silly."

Unlike older public art by Alexander Calder and other artists, who exhibited mainly in galleries and museums, many of the new monuments are the work of artists who have left the studio behind. They go "from arts council to arts council, municipality to municipality, state to state . . . in answer to calls for public works of art." The resulting public art fre-

quently is "compromised and tepid."

Two works of public art that succeeded as art, in Plagens's view, prove the rule. Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C.—"probably the best 20th-century work of public art in America"—is regarded as a great success. But when Lin's design was criticized as dishonoring those who had fought, Frederick Hart's more traditional sculpture of three soldiers was added, Plagens points out. "The society that commissioned [Lin's work] could not drink it down full." The lesson is even clearer in the case of Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc," a 120-foot-long, 12-foot-high wall of brown, stained steel that was placed in Foley Plaza in downtown Manhattan in 1981. So loud were the howls of protest from federal workers who used the plaza that the offending work (for which the government had paid \$175,000) was eventually removed (at a cost of \$50,000). Some critics blamed the debacle on the arrogant artist, but Plagens believes that "Tilted Arc" failed as public art chiefly because it worked as art: its "real sin was to disturb."

Revenge of the Maus

"Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: Graphic Art and the Holocaust" by Thomas Doherty, in *American Literature* (Mar. 1996), Box 90020, Duke Univ., Durham, N.C. 27708-0020.

A Holocaust comic book seems an unlikely, if not indeed obscene, conceit, yet Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991), awarded a special Pulitzer citation in 1992, made it

work. In this two-volume cartoon biography of his father, a survivor of Auschwitz, Spiegelman cast the Nazis as snarling cats, Jews as forlorn mice, and Poles as stupid pigs.

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THE ONES THAT HAD NOT SO LUCKY THE S.S. WROTE DOWN THEIR NUMBER AND SENT TO THE OTHER SIDE.

The language and tone of Spiegelman's comic book work are tempered and austere.

In a way, contends Doherty, a professor of American studies at Brandeis University, Spiegelman was turning the Nazis' own view of art against them.

Nazism was not only a force in history but an aesthetic stance, critics such as Hans-Jurgen Syberberg have maintained. The Nazis condemned abstract impressionism and other "degenerate art," and insisted that art should celebrate perfection in form. This vision was expressed most vividly in such films as *Triumph of the Will* (1935), a documentary of the 1934 Nazi Party Congress at Nuremberg, in which filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl "worshipfully frames the hallowed faces of beatific *Hitlerjugend* and fanatic Labor Service workers."

The Nazis regularly consigned the Jews to the "lower" visual medium of the cartoon, which they regarded as a valuable propaganda tool. "The pivotal inspiration for Spiegelman's cat and mouse gamble," Doherty writes, "was the visual stereotypes of Third Reich symbology, the hackwork from the

mephistoes at [Joseph] Goebbels's Reichsministry and Julius Streicher's venomous weekly *Der Stürmer*—the anti-Semitic broadsheets and editorial cartoons depicting Jews as hook-nosed, beady-eyed *Untermenschen*, creatures whose ferret faces and rodent snouts marked them as human vermin." Spiegelman's anthropomorphized mice carry traces of *Der Stürmer's* anti-Semitic Jew-as-rat cartoons, the artist himself has said, "but by being particularized they are invested with personhood; they stand upright and affirm their humanity."

Against the vivid newsreel footage of the Nazi death camps, with their emaciated survivors, heaps of corpses, and children with serial numbers tattooed on their arms, it is all but impossible for the visual artist to compete, Doherty notes. One way is to resurrect "the impressionist techniques censored by the Nazis" and use them to show Nazism's horrors. "Working from a lowbrow rung of the ladder of art," that is what Spiegelman successfully did.

A Friend Speaks. . .

"What do you think of the *New Yorker* now?" Martha Davis Beck, associate editor of *Hungry Mind Review* (Spring 1996), asked novelist and long-time *New Yorker* contributor John Updike.

I think the New Yorker is worth trying to save, and clearly any magazine changes; the New Yorker itself changed quite a lot in the course of its pre-Tina [Brown] years. Maybe she is more like Harold Ross, and it is now more like Ross's magazine than the long [William] Shawn interim. Under Shawn it was a literary publication that nevertheless attracted advertisers and had a fair amount of revenue to disperse to writers, who indeed created and supported it—a whole stable of writers. . . .

[Whatever] else it is at this point, it's not a magazine that's offering itself as a seedbed for literature. It will print writers who have a name, and it will bring on a few splashy younger ones, but the old one was so nurturing. I mean, they ran so much fiction—they ran at least two and sometimes three stories an issue. And you felt it was a real trade, an honest trade. You made a thing which you could sell. And that's not a bad way to be a writer. There has to be some connection to the market. You have to make a living, you have to feed your children. So I'm sorry to see that particular cultural slot go.

Nocturne for the Duke

"The Duke's Blues" by Stanley Crouch, in *The New Yorker* (Apr. 29 and May 6, 1996), 20 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

Duke Ellington (1899–1974) maintained an orchestra for nearly a half-century—

longer than any other Western composer. (The orchestra that Prince Esterházy of