

# PASTORAL MIRAGE

## David Schafer

A multi-site installation project for Prospect Park, Brooklyn  
June-December 1993

Twin assumptions, commonly held — that Prospect Park has always existed and that it always will — are reflections as much of the success of designer Frederick Law Olmsted's vision as of its fragility. The Park is so well integrated into our lives and so appropriate to our needs, more than 100 years after it was designed and built, it is easy to forget that the same careful and conscious effort required to build the Park is necessary to preserve it.

"Pastoral Mirage," a temporary multi-site installation project for Prospect Park, was conceived by sculptor David Schafer as a kind of antidote to the effects of such thinking. In the first place is the scope of his project: mindful of Olmsted from the start, Schafer identified the Park itself as the primary work of art and his installation as an eccentric guide through it.

Then there is his title, "Pastoral Mirage," a reference more perhaps to Olmsted's creation than to his own. We are reminded that this landscape which provides the urban dweller with a "ready means of escape" from the stresses and constraints of the city is as much a man-made creation as the city itself, albeit with very different building materials. We are induced to think again about the often used phrase, "naturalistic landscape," not to dispel the romance of Olmsted's illusion but to marvel at the wonder of it.

The third critical element in Schafer's conception, language, may be Pastoral Mirage's most challenging aspect but it is also the most rewarding. Because the language is Olmsted's and because it directly concerns Prospect Park, the viewer is asked, in a sense, to tour the Park with the man whose vision and philosophy created it. The fact that he speaks with a 19th century voice, a voice that doesn't always fall so easily on 20th century ears, enhances rather than diminishes the impact of the "tour." There can be no doubt that the Park originated in a time far different than our own. A reminder, once again, of the prophetic nature of Olmsted's vision.

And, finally, there is the form taken by "Pastoral Mirage." Aesthetically neutral and boldly contemporary in structure and materials, Schafer's installation makes no attempt to "blend in" with the landscape. Nor does it seek to decorate or in any way embellish the Park's design. In the form of 14 site-markers on tall steel poles painted bright yellow and supported by steel cabling it does, however, demand to be noticed,



Photo: Mary Gregg

David Schafer  
Pastoral Mirage  
1993  
Multi-site Installation  
Painted Steel & Aluminum,  
Galvanized Cables & Vinyl Letters  
12 single-panel sites (16' x 3' x 6')  
2 four-panel sites (22' x 4' x 8')

which may well be the project's most controversial quality. Visitors acclimated to the 19th century scale and aesthetic Olmsted so meticulously nurtured may find "Pastoral Mirage" especially troubling. In deliberate contrast to Olmsted's most quiet and lyrical voice from which every Park visitor derives incalculable benefit, Schafer seems to shout.

Which brings us back full circle to the premise, however false, that we can take for granted this

tremendous resource. In the last years of the 20th century we can survey the distance we've travelled since Olmsted proposed the design of Prospect Park and marvel at the richness of our lives that is the result of "progress." But it is equally powerful to be reminded of the contributions made by our histories. And in this cacophonous time, one in which it's unlikely that a Prospect Park could ever be built, maybe the past can only be honored with a shout. So that generations from now will have the luxury of believing, however falsely, that Prospect Park has always existed and that it always will.

At right is a transcription of the Schafer/Olmsted text as it appears at each site. Although the sites are numbered they are in no particular order: the numbering system acts as a point of reference only (see map, *verso*). Quotes numbered 1-4 and 17-20 appear at two of the Park's principal entrances where the installations are taller (22') and four-sided, acknowledging common foot, bicycle and vehicular traffic patterns. Site-markers at the other 12 sites are 16' tall and are intended to be approached from a single direction.

Each installation, as is true of virtually every site in Prospect Park, bears multiple visits and readings. Site 6, for example, where the word (VACANT) appears in relation to Olmsted's ambitions for the metropolis of Brooklyn may inspire awe in some when viewed against the splendor of Grand Army Plaza, and disappointment in others at what may have been Brooklyn's unrealized promise as an urban center. The messages at Sites 10 and 12 may be the most consternating, since they both contain information about what *isn't*: near the present-day 9th Street Bandshell, (AUDIENCE) describes Olmsted's highly choreographed plan for Park concerts which were intended to take place in an altogether different manner; a walk through the old Concert Grove may serve to complete the picture of just how different the concert-going experience must have been in Olmsted's time. (LANDMARK), appearing on the edge of the area known as Nellie's Lawn, is actually a bold presentation of Olmsted's directive *against* landmarks which arguably would include the very item employed to inform the viewer of the directive.

Connie Butler, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Neuberger Museum at the State University of New York/Purchase, offers another, more challenging interpretation of Schafer's aims in the essay to be found far right. Butler argues, drawing Mt. Rushmore as a sharp example, that Park visitors may in fact be spectators witness to an elaborate illusion (the making of Prospect Park) which Schafer's interventionist act serves to illuminate (reminding us *how* it was made).

Different times of day, and different times of year, too, will suggest new meanings. The play of morning mist, trees brought to full leaf in summer, the crispness of early evening light or the wide-open vistas of winter, will all affect the ways in which the Park functions as a participant in the conversation Schafer has initiated between Olmsted and his 20th century viewer. And of course each visitor will bring his or her own point of view, and history, to the Park and to Schafer's work making it possible to reduce the grandeur of this public space and the ambitious scale of this project to a single, intimate and personal experience.

Melissa Benson  
Curator, Visual Arts Program  
Prospect Park Alliance

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For more information about the Visual Arts Program in Prospect Park, call (718) 965-8961