

Wishful Sculptures

Critical and poetic considerations of the city

Hervé-Armand Bechy

Since the 1990s, through her various creative artworks in France, her studies for the city of New York, a series of projects in Saxe-Anhalt and three new pieces for social housing projects in Brussels, the artist Cécile Pitois has been developing an entire thought process focusing on notions of the city and public space. Her sculptural creations, titled *Sculptures à Souhait*—Wishful Sculptures—are based on invented, fictional tales that fire the imagination and encourage new readings of the given location and new types of social appropriation. The resulting artistic gesture can be likened to an offering made to the city. At the same time this mark of generosity—this gift—requires a form of ritual and social exchange.

A Pragmatic Undertaking

Although intended for public spaces, Pitois' *Sculptures à Souhait* are not the result of conventional public commissions. She emphasizes that it is, first and foremost, her interest in a city and its people, in social interactions, that prompts her to create pieces for urban space. Acting on her own initiative, she selects the locations for her interventions herself, her choices dictated not by their visibility but their social and symbolic value.

As a first step, Cécile Pitois follows a pragmatic and intuitive process that leads her to canvass a given area in order to capture a powerful feature or determine a work angle before developing it further, extending and refining this guiding thread through a series of investigations. For this, she bases her approach not only on documentary research but also on encounters that give her an opportunity to glean information about the location, its history and its social interactions. Gradually, through the inhabitants' intersecting perspectives, elements emerge and their significance becomes obvious to her.

The pre-eminence of the tale

This fieldwork and accumulated research lead to the elaboration of a "tale" that draws on local reality but which actually remains a fiction: an entirely invented construct. Cécile Pitois often uses as a point of departure a local account that could be a human-interest story—the facts are anecdotal, almost banal. The tale is the means by which the artist gets closer to the reality of a location and evokes its transformations; it tells us something about the past, about recent history, and about the present. But first and foremost it functions as a pretext for telling a story with a more general and universal impact. This leads to a form of questioning which, in turn, is a way of involving people in contemporary reality.

The story strives to be concise, simple and ordinary, constructed like a fairy tale, a fable or a legend. It is the means by which the artist refers to the location. "Once upon a time" or "one day" forms her point of departure. This timelessness is intentional: the tale strives to convey a global explanation by using facts or events that form part of local reality and by letting magical or enchanting elements intervene. Therein lie all the characteristics of myths which, according to the definition given by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) are "stories through which a society tries to understand how it was created, the reason for which things are the way they are". The myth is a gatherer because it belongs to no one and because anyone can make it their own. The tale, as envisioned by the artist, obviates all rational explanation and does not have to demonstrate its veracity. The tale might, in fact, be true: doubt remains admissible, given the extent to which it combines real and imaginary elements. It can even offer an explanation of the location, of its existence, of its *raison d'être*. But the interest for the artist is elsewhere: to stimulate our imagination in order to develop our capacity to appropriate urban social space.

Even if the tale occupies an important place in the work itself, the response is not only a mental one. The artist also strives to materialize her work within a visual dimension that will be more or less durable using different media. The tale is a pretext, as has just been demonstrated. The creation of the artwork is the second phase, and not an entirely related one to the extent that it is neither the narration nor the illustration of the tale, nor is it distinct since the tale prepares for the birth of the sculpture. Whereas the tale follows a linear course, the development of the artwork is undertaken through a process of constant questioning and forsaking. Cécile Pitois explores several possibilities at once while at the same time questioning the relevance of each. This chaotic journey is the path any artist must follow before allowing the unique alchemy of the project to take hold. Here begins the thought process relating to the symbolism of representations, the formal aspect, and the choice of materials; everything that enters the field of formal visual language and vocabulary. This transition, as the artist concedes, is a delicate moment when everything will acquire its meaning. The materialization of the work can either intensify its impact and attain the desired poetic dimension, or on the contrary limit its scope: much is therefore at stake. In addition, Cécile Pitois' work is not only visual in nature, it is also, and perhaps above all, meant to trigger certain modes of social appropriation of urban space.

The ritual dimension

With each of her works, the artist invites the city dweller to "share a ritual inspired by the historical, social and cultural context. This ritual dimension implies a dual experience, both personal and collective, of time and place" and offers each of us a way of experiencing space and continuing, in our own way, the tale's narrative, whose text is printed on a plaque placed near the sculpture. The sculpture and the text, placed in relation to one another, thus become inseparable and connect to form a single work of art. Social appropriation is at the heart of the artistic work developed by Cécile Pitois; indeed it underscores the very accomplishment of the work, to such an extent that the social relationship experienced by the inhabitants when they look at the sculpture becomes its main feature. Through the relationship she weaves between a visual work of art, a tale that forms its foundation, and a ritual that forms its extension, both Cécile Pitois' artistic intention and the originality of her work are able to express themselves. In addition, her work is also underscored by considerations stemming from art history. As well as analysing locales and the evolution of urban society, she deliberately includes implicit references to the history of public sculpture. This dual level of analysis is the other focus of interest in this polysemous body of work. These artworks within public space offer new anchoring points in the fragmented field of urban reality. The urban myths they spawn express a feeling of belonging to a specific location, no matter what the viewers' culture, history or differences may be, while also providing a detached view via a critical and poetic approach to the city. The Sculptures à Souhait thus contribute to the creation of new sociabilities and to the construction of a new urbanity.

Hervé-Armand Bechy

Theorist specializing in public art / 2013

"A New York Artist"

Sharon Zukin

It may seem ironic to call Cécile Pitois a "New York artist." But rarely does a foreigner arrive on these shores and, without losing her perspective as an outsider, look beneath the city's exotic mosaic to find a core that is both universal in spirit and specific to place. The extraordinary achievement of Cécile Pitois' creative work is to express the genius loci of New York's distinct, but often unremarkable neighborhoods in public installations that have simple designs and multiple, nuanced meanings. The link between design and meaning is forged by ritual. Here, too, there are double layers, for Cécile Pitois grounds her public art in both historical processes and contemporary practices, in individual actions and collective dreams. Unlike most visitors, Cécile Pitois traveled across the East River to the less common territories of Brooklyn and Queens. Rejecting the insularity of the city's well known "creative" districts, she went to neighborhoods that have not yet been gentrified, to public housing projects and immigrant communities. There she found men and women who are trying to create communities and, in that process, to find their place in the city.

Flatbush lions

My favorite among Cécile Pitois' New York projects is the pair of lions that she designed to be installed at the visually chaotic intersection of two broad, heavily trafficked commercial streets in Brooklyn: Flatbush and Nostrand Avenues. Perhaps I like this project because I teach nearby, at Brooklyn College, and here, with the sculptural form of lions, Cécile Pitois succeeds in integrating the social and cultural diversity of Flatbush, a large, amorphous, mainly residential district.

Pedaling up and down the residential streets, the artist noticed that many individual houses were guarded by small white plaster sculptures of lions' heads, which the home owners had placed on the gate posts, almost as sentries, maybe as household gods and definitely as symbols of pride. Though we can trace this practice back to ancient Rome, immigrants brought the household lions to New York from Italy, the Caribbean and the Middle East, beginning in the mid-1900s. Cécile Pitois also visited Brooklyn College. There, on the central quadrangle, she was struck by a small bust of the head of Martin Luther King, Jr. She noted the quotation from King which is engraved on a bronze plaque near the sculpture: "True peace is not the absence of tension, but the presence of justice." This reminded her of the two socially and architecturally distinct halves of Flatbush, which are divided by the Brooklyn College campus. On one side, in apartment houses and small homes, lives a mainly Caribbean population, many of whom come from Haiti. On the other side of the campus, in big houses with little gardens, lives an ethnically diverse, but more affluent population, which is beginning to include gentrifiers. To express—and integrate—the two sides of the district, the artist borrowed the sculptural form of the household lions. The first lion would bear the quotation about justice from Martin Luther King; the other would have no coat of arms, but on the underside of one upraised palm a sign would say: "Not Found". While the first lion affirms a universal ideal of justice, Cécile Pitois says, the second offers an opportunity to passersby to present their own idea of justice—and to respond to the ideas of others. In this way the installation adapts a vernacular cultural idiom to create a participatory dynamic of social justice.

United by water

In another voyage of discovery, Cécile Pitois visited Red Hook Houses, a multi-building, multi-story public housing project built for dock workers near the Brooklyn waterfront in 1939. By the time of the artist's visit, in the early 2000s, the port had shut down, and the initial tenants had long since moved out or died. Though these families were first- and second-generation European immigrants, they had been replaced by Hispanics, mainly from Puerto Rico, and African Americans. The tragic ghettoization of America's public housing projects is echoed in the triple segregation of Red Hook Houses. First, the entire district of Red Hook is cut off from the rest of Brooklyn by the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, which was built in the 1950s. Second, the white residents of Red Hook, who live in small houses close to the waterfront, do not mingle with the residents of the public housing project, whom they associate with a long period of violent crime and terrorization by drug dealers from the 1970s to the 1990s. Third, the massive number of buildings in Red Hook Houses, and their isolation from the waterfront, creates a town of nearly 7,000 inhabitants, which faces inward toward a large green space and a wide, interior walkway. Cécile Pitois was not alarmed by the public housing project's reputation for violence. Walking around the project and speaking with residents, she discovered a deep reservoir of friendship that they had built up, based on the mutual dependencies that sociologists call social capital. Moreover, some residents said, the "bad" reputation that keeps outsiders at bay strengthens the tenants' own social solidarity. Like sociologists who write about the "two faces" of ghettos, representing both repression and solidarity, the artist decided to create a counter-narrative to the public housing project's negative image that would express the residents' strong friendships. The visual motif of a mischievous child would represent all the children of Red Hook Houses, the mothers who take care of them and the residents who feel they are members of the same, extended family. *Over Walls* is a provocative work. It features a 50-foot-tall, turquoise fountain of a boy urinating into a pond. On the dull, red brick walls of surrounding buildings, words like "magic" and "friends" are painted in the same bright hue. Though Americans might be offended by the boy's action, he reminds us of the famous statue "Manneken Pis" that graces a fountain in Brussels, and the pond provides a gathering place for residents. Together with the story Cécile Pitois devised, the art project transforms both the family dinners and teenage gangs of Red Hook Houses into a mischievous child whose transgression of social norms is no longer dangerous, but human. The human and the urban Cécile Pitois shows a rare ability to pierce the city's façade of anonymity and arrogance to discover the human element. She finds the human in social solidarity as well as in individual deviance from the norm. Like the wishes in her European installations, the artist's New York stories bring people together in an active role to create a tangible feeling of community. For public art, this is a rare and precious vision.

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Sharon Zukin

Professor of sociology at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She is the author of a trilogy of books about New York City: *Loft Living* (1989), *The Cultures of Cities* (1995) and *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (2010).