

# The City As Gallery

*Creative Time Redefines Public Art by Putting Contemporary Art in the Most Surprising Places*

by Robert Sandia

Whether on the brave new landfill of Battery Park City, at the Bandshell in the center of Central Park, or deep in the Piranesian vaults of the Brooklyn Bridge anchorage, Creative Time has consistently presented some of New York's most provocative visual and performing artists in some of New York's least expected settings. When the not-for-profit arts group stretches enormous paintings across the caverns of the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage, or silhouettes new dance against the restless skyline of Manhattan, it turns the city into a gallery, and suggests the exotic in the everyday. And when Creative Time brought contemporary art to the subway, a milieu notoriously inhospitable to art, as it did in 1984, results were generally spectacular. In this summer's Art on the Beach series, Creative Time drags the avant garde out to Hunter's Point, the peninsula which juts into the East River from industrial Long Island City, and turns all Manhattan into a backdrop. Art is where you find it.

Of Creative Time's unique role, executive director Cee Brown remarks, "When we put contemporary art in unexpected places, we hope to catch someone's eye, and possibly kindle their imagination." Alyson Pou, director of programming, remarks, "Essentially, what we're all about is a continuous redefining of the meaning of public art."

Creative Time was founded by Anita Contini in 1973, when she realized that otherwise neglected or ignored spaces could provide galleries and stages for artists desperate to show their work. Contini sought to bring together government, and business, and the artistic community to get new art directly into public spaces.

An eye-catching early presentation sponsored by Creative Time was Red Grooms' *Ruckus Manhattan*, which elbowed itself into 88 Pine Street in 1975. Before Laurie Anderson played concert halls, Creative Time presented her in the evocative Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage. Other performing artists who have appeared under the aegis of Creative Time include Melissa Fenley, Bill T. Jones, and Philip Glass. Since its founding, over 500 emerging and established artists and performers have been presented in a variety of places.

One of Creative Time's most surprising places is its office. This summer, the organization is presenting Art on the Beach, Art in the Anchorage, and the dance and performance elements of Central Park's Summerstage series, but the organization itself is squeezed into three small rooms in lower Manhattan. Cee Brown and Alyson Pou work there with two other full-time staff members, part-time workers, volunteers, consultants, and the organization's board of directors.

Brown and Pou both have backgrounds in arts administration. Brown worked for the Museum of Modern Art, directed the Holly Solomons Gallery for five years, and spent time at a company which put together art collections for corporations. Pou worked for Creative Time as a consultant in various capacities before she became director of public relations and programming. Though both are vital and



A scene from Art on the Beach's 1984 production

of Ellen Fisher's *The Happy Hour*.

engaged, they seem remarkably calm for people who have three ambitious programs running all over town, a benefit coming up, and are working on an unprecedented collaboration with the Kitchen and the New Museum.

**Robert Sandia:** *Creative Time puts art in public spaces where you'd never think to look for it. Where do you find the spaces?*

**Cee Brown:** It depends. Sometimes people come to us with ideas because of past programs they have seen. When they find a place we might not have heard of, they give us a call. We deal with realtors, business people, the city. Sometimes we'll find a space and have to search for whoever owns it to beg them to let us use it. We're always on the lookout.

In the case of Art on the Beach, which is at Hunter's Point this year, the location is donated by the Port Authority of

New York and New Jersey, which is not an organization most people would associate with the avant-garde. This is the second year we've been invited back by the Parks Department to handle part of Summerstage. It's not so much the striking space in Central Park that attracted us, as the possibility of art in the open where masses of people can walk by, and maybe watch.

**Alyson Pou:** We have to be very flexible. Sometimes space will just come to us, sometimes artists will come to us seeking space and we will try to find the most accurate, appropriate space for their art. Our concern for space aside, everything we do is toward the presentation of interesting, unusual topical work. We can't get locked into a hierarchy or fixed structure, but we have to respond to the needs of the artists and to the needs of the

public.

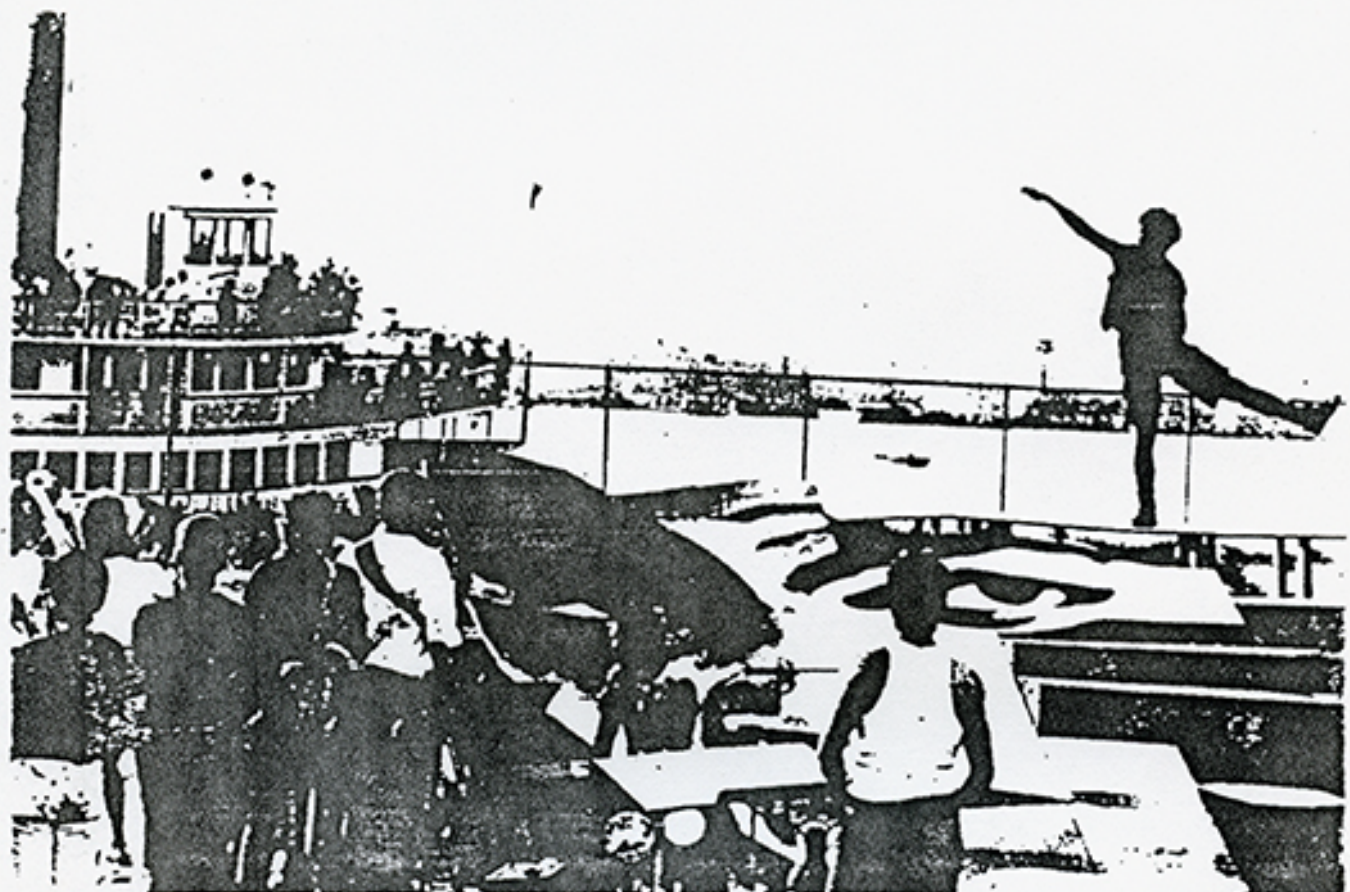
*How do you find those artists?*

**Brown:** Several ways. For Art on the Beach, we sent out requests for proposals to the 3,000 artists on our mailing lists for Art on the Beach. We hope those artists will in turn let their friends know. Last year we received over 400 responses to the request. Then we all sit down and go through tons of material. It's important to know that any decisions at Creative Time are made by a number of panelists and consultants, people who are very active and informed in their fields, and many of whom are artists. They advise us and provide us with information and ideas. When we make decisions and selections, we want them to be very well informed ones.

*Is there a certain type of work associated with Creative Time? A typical style?*

**Brown:** I don't think anything we do is





Above: Yoshiko Chuma in *AI on the Beach*, 1985. Below left: Rachel Rosenthal in *Soldier of Fortune*. Below right: Arthur Armijo in *It's in Four Parts*.

epical. By the very nature of what we do, however, by our sites, we offer artists the chance to do large-scale sculpture, and to do that in New York, out doors. Very few other organizations offer that kind of ex-

posure. This will sound a little strange, but we also give people the chance to fail. We want artists to succeed, of course, but perhaps an artist in mid-career wants to change directions, to try some new ideas

That's tough to do. So we see ourselves as a risk-taking venture as well. Our track record is not based just on how many A-pluses we get. That's not what we're about.

**Pou:** We make our commitment to the artist and not to the particular product. We don't require artists to stick to the absolute last detail of their proposals. Most people wouldn't get an opportunity to create works of the scale of *Art on the Beach* until they had done a museum show or had a commission from a park. Such projects often have restrictions on them which we do not impose.

**Do you think there is anything ironic about a performer like Rachel Rosenberg who is such an iconoclast, being supported through *Creative Time* by the Parks Department and corporate sponsors like Phillip Morris?**

**Brown:** Corporations and government funding agencies are more advanced than most people might think.

**Pou:** The corporate donors and the Parks people come onto these programs with really open eyes. They know the artists we propose, and are supportive about presenting work which is concerned with social change.

**Any new projects work coming on soon?**

**Brown:** We are getting together with the Kitchen and the New Museum to present Survival Research Laboratories, a performance art group from California, in its first full-scale New York appearance. Survival Research makes moving sculpture from machines and robots, actual machines that walk, drive around, collide, even destroy each other. It's exciting work about how we tend to an-

thropomorphize machines, like the square-wheeled Car, or the Sprinkler for Hell. It's also about the fascination and repulsion of technology, and ultimately of evil.

**When will this happen?**

**Brown:** Early October.

**And how you found a place?**

**Pou:** Not yet. But we're looking for something really spectacular. ■



Bob Beatty



Tom Brown