

Monument/Anti-Monument Conference Puts Public Sculpture In The Spotlight

Stephanie Zimmerman

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As home to works such as Eero Saarinen's "Gateway Arch" and Richard Serra's "Twain" and to places such as Laumeier Sculpture Park and CityGarden, St. Louis has established itself as a formidable player in the public sculpture arena. This reputation is likely to be bolstered by the Monument/Anti-Monument Conference here from April 10-12. It is part of the Sculpture City St. Louis 2014 initiative.

Marilu Knode, executive director and chief curator of Laumeier Sculpture Park, is the driving force behind the effort. When Knode learned that 2014 was the 250th anniversary of the modern founding of St. Louis, she said she wanted to ensure a visible role for the arts in the city's celebration. So, three years ago, she assembled a steering committee of area arts professionals to figure out how to do just that. What emerged was Sculpture City St. Louis 2014, an initiative to promote and encourage sculpture-related activity in St. Louis. (She also declared 2014 the "Year of Sculpture," partially because, she said, "no one will stop you.")

The Monument/Anti-Monument conference came from a desire to add intellectual content to the celebration of sculpture in St. Louis.

Monuments are sculptures traditionally erected by victors. These do not all involve the valiant soldier on horseback (Think Gen. Lyon in the park named for him, which is located near Anheuser-Busch.) The Arch, as a symbol of westward expansion, is clearly in the monumental tradition.

The term anti-monument was first used in the 1980s in reference to the work of land artist Robert Smithson, who was known for his large-scale manipulation of natural materials, such as his seminal 1970 work, "Spiral Jetty." An anti-monument stands in contrast to the traditional monument, which is often a work created with a specific agenda by high-powered civic leaders. Instead of glorifying a person or event, an anti-monument challenges it. Like memorials placed on the side of a highway or artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's installations, anti-monuments are often created or heavily influenced by the public.

Lozano-Hemmer will give the keynote address. He is a Mexican-born artist living in Montreal who is internationally recognized for his monumental scale works. They use public participation to create dynamic visible and audible effects. In his 2008 piece, "Voz Alta," or "Loud Voice," the voices of participants speaking into megaphones were translated into beams of light. The project was designed to memorialize the 1968 student massacres in Tlatelolco and installed in Mexico City. On his website, Lozano-Hemmer describes his works as "anti-monuments for alien agency" -- platforms filled with content by the public participants of the work rather than by the artist himself.

At the Monument/Anti-Monument conference, discussion will center on the ways different modes of public sculpture affect the landscape. Topics include online sculptural practices, historic efforts to remove public sculpture, and the role of monuments that memorialize victims rather than victors. Making up the panels will be such nationally recognized experts as Glenn Harper, editor of Sculpture Magazine, as well as St. Louis based art professionals such as artist Juan William Chávez.

"We wanted to place St. Louis in a broader national dialogue about new genres of public art," said Knode.

Those who planned the Monument/Anti-Monument conference wanted to make certain that attendees went out where the sculpture was. "It's not just about sitting inside a room listening to people talk," said Knode "If you're having a conference about sculpture and St. Louis is this rich repository, you have to get people outside into the city." Among the sites that will be visited are Laumeier Sculpture Park, Forest Park, Cahokia Mounds and Bellefontaine Cemetery.

The title of the conference "Monument/Anti-Monument" communicates the event's interest in considering multiple, sometimes conflicting, modes of sculptural practice, and evaluating how these shape our understanding of place. The Arch frames downtown St. Louis and the Mississippi River, promising that the geography will be the site of a magnificent future. In contrast, Serra's "Twain" obstructs a visitor's view of the city -- offering only momentary glimpses of the environment in the breaks between the sculpture's steel walls.

Knode also hopes that the conference will make one thing clear—St. Louis is a cool place.

"I think St. Louis is a fabulous city," said Knode, "and I would like other people from different parts of the country to come and see how fabulous it is."