

TEMPORARY MONUMENTS:
WORK BY ROSEMARY MAYER, 1977–1982

Edited by Marie Warsh and Max Warsh

Soberscove Press | Chicago

“PLEASURES AND POSSIBLE CELEBRATIONS”:

ROSEMARY MAYER’S TEMPORARY MONUMENTS, 1977–1982

Gillian Sneed

“All men are into power,” reads the opening line of a stream-of-consciousness text by the artist Rosemary Mayer.¹ The passage denounces the macho art system, epitomized in Mayer’s mind by Richard Serra’s then-recent monumental public sculptures. Written in May 1980, just one year before the controversy surrounding Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981), Mayer’s text likely references one of two earlier works by Serra, erected in lower Manhattan in the spring of 1980: *T.W.U.*, a construction of vertical slabs, or *St. John’s Rotary Arc*, a curved horizontal wall similar to *Tilted Arc* (FIG. 1).² Both sculptures were Minimalist in style, both were made of corten steel, and both had been the objects of verbal and physical attack by the public. Viewing Serra’s works as emblematic of broader problems in the art world, Mayer continues:

Not participating in a male system. . . . Power is evidence of inequality. . . . The Serra piece is CORTEN steel . . . [and is] not balanced, so it is a sign for other works of his. . . . Evidence of power manipulating the system. . . . Public art has to deal with people’s opinion.³

At the heart of this passage, written from the perspective of a marginalized feminist sculptor as she looked toward the horizon of a new decade, is a reflection



FIG. 1. Richard Serra, *T.W.U.*, 1980. Weatherproof steel. Three plates, each: 36 ft x 12 ft x 2¾ in (11 m x 3.7 m x 7 cm). Collection of the City of Hamburg, Germany. (Had been installed at West Broadway between Leonard and Franklin Streets, New York, 1980–81. Currently installed at the Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, Germany). Photo by Donna Svennevik. Courtesy the photographer.

SPELL

Installed on April 8, 1977

Balloons, helium, paint, fabric, and rope

Farmer's Market, Jamaica, New York

Photographs, text, flyers, artist's book



SPELL

Text from artist's book, 1977.

Published in *WhiteWalls: A Magazine of Writings by Artists*,

No. 2, Winter–Spring 1979.

Iris return, hyacinth return, crocus return.

Madelaine on the porch when we climbed in the tree and onto the slanted cellar door; George in the cellar between sacks of vegetables, empty birdcages; Teddy telling George how to grow more apples.

The phrases would be painted in red on inflated white weather balloons. Nets of gold-colored cord would contain the balloons, hold transparent reds, orange-yellows and greens floating between and down from the balloons. Other green and yellow cords would be moorings. All the colors would be unrolled when the balloons rose. They and the balloons with words would float over the stalls and displays at the opening of a flowers market in Jamaica in early April, 1977.

Weeds grow on some edges of cities, when stems can manage the sun, lift leaves, colors, up over pavements, fences, come up again through cracks in cement. Neighborhoods like these on the ways to schools, to movies or buying records. Garden flowers are different.

George's cheeks pushed out wider when he laughed. Sometimes double grey and black whiskers angled out different lengths from his face and neck. His pants were browns and greys. They sagged under his stomach and knees, were lower in back than in front. His shirts were dull, his shoes worn. He laughed when he rolled on the carpet with children. Then the flesh shook on his turning body. He lived near here in Jamaica.

Katherine
Madelaine
George
Madelaine
Florence
Catherine
Teddy



SPELL

a work by Rosemary Mayer

I R I S *return*

C R O C U S *return*

H Y A C I N T H I *return*



Three weather balloons with words
joined by swags of cloth
in a floating sculpture
a hundred feet overhead
Farmers' Market Jamaica
April 8 and 9...

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~~He made wine between~~
~~the~~ He made wine between
~~the~~ the old birdcage. They
~~serv~~ served it at every ^{New} Year's party.
Year's party.
Year's party.