

Doug and Mike Starn

Evolution from Photography to Public Art

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Methodology	1
1.2 At the Intersection of Photography and Intermediality	4
1.3 Framework and Goals	7
1.4 Existing Research.....	10
2. The Starn Twins: Early Career, Style and Studio Practice	16
2.1 Biographical Background and Artistic Evolution	16
2.2 Early Gallery and Museum Exhibitions	18
2.3 Photography as Leading Medium	20
2.4 Large Scale.....	23
2.5 Appropriation	25
2.6 Collaborative Geniuses	30
3. The Installations	35
3.1 Transition from Portfolio Work to Large-Scale Installation Art.....	35
3.2 <i>Ramparts Café</i> , Tower of David Museum	39
3.3 <i>Behind Your Eye</i> , Neuberger Museum of Art	42
3.4 <i>Gravity of Light</i> , Färgfabriken Kunsthalle and U.S. Venues.....	46
3.5 From Installation to Public Art.....	52
4. The Catalyst: Impact of 9/11 on New York City	54
4.1 Post-9/11 Desperation and Remembrance in New York	55
4.2 The Starns and 9/11	58
4.3 Artistic Production after 9/11.....	60
4.4 Selected Public Art in Response to 9/11	62
5. The Agency: Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit	73
5.1 Rebuilding and Improving New York's Infrastructure after 9/11	73
5.2 The MTA Arts for Transit Program	74
5.3 The South Ferry Subway Station.....	77
5.4 Artist Selection Process for the Redesigned South Ferry Subway Station	80
6. Evolution: Context and Continuity in the Work of Doug and Mike Starn ...	83
6.1 The Starn Proposal.....	83
6.2 Work Relevant for the First Public Art Commission.....	85
7. Public Art Process: Integrating Art with Architecture	89
7.1 Administration	89
7.2 Fabrication: Collaboration with Mayer of Munich and Polich Art Works.....	90

8. On Site: <i>See it split, see it change</i> at South Ferry Subway Station, 2009	98
8.1 Description.....	98
8.2 Context, Material and Meaning: <i>See it split, see it change</i> within the MTA Arts for Transit Collection.....	101
8.3 Iconography.....	107
9. Art in the Community: <i>From One, Two; and From Two, One</i> at Aspen Institute, 2008	113
9.1 Project Background: Conference on Tibetan Arts and Culture	113
9.2 Site and Project Context.....	115
9.3 Work Relevant for the Aspen Institute Project.....	117
9.4 Engaging Community in the Creative Process.....	124
9.5 The Starns as Stage Designers	126
10. Retreat to the Studio: <i>Big Bambú</i>, 2008-09	130
10.1 Art Making as Reaction to the Constraints of Public Art Process.....	130
10.2 The Antecedent: <i>Sphere of Influence</i> , 1991	131
10.3 The Creative Process.....	134
10.4 Getting the Word Out: <i>Big Bambú's</i> Studio Debut	138
11. <i>Big Bambú</i>: International Temporary Outdoor Installations	142
11.1 Choosing Partners and Sites	142
11.2 Metropolitan Museum of Art, April 27–October 31, 2010	143
11.3 Venice Biennial, May 29–June 15, 2011	150
11.4 The <i>Big Bambú</i> Installations: Variations on a Theme	157
12. Conclusion: Photography at the Intersection of Public Art.....	159
12.1 Photography as Artform <i>and</i> Tool for Documentation.....	160
12.2 Digital Photography as Medium for Public Art	161
12.3 Responsive Relationships	162
Bibliography.....	165
List of Illustrations	171
List of Credits	179
Illustrations.....	180

1. Introduction

This book investigates the pioneering installations and public art by Doug and Mike Starn, establishes their position within the complete oeuvre and examines the confluence of media they have worked in, while situating the artists and their work within the contemporary art historic context. Intrinsic characteristics of the Starn brothers' work are the principles of interconnectedness, continuity, duality and change, a continuous evolution combined with a stunning ability to reinvent their work, redefining entire art genres in the process. Highlights of the pair's stellar career to date include the completion of two important public art projects in New York City in 2008 and 2010, one permanent and one temporary: the permanent public art environment *See it split, see it change* on the concourse of South Ferry Subway Station at the tip of Manhattan and the temporary, monumental *Big Bambú* installation on the Metropolitan Museum's roof garden. Naturally, these outstanding works were preceded by years of artistic inquiry and development in the genre of photography, whose path we will explore.

Identical twins Doug and Mike Starn, born in 1961 and included in the 1987 Whitney Biennial (Ill. 16) at the age of 26, work collaboratively. The primary medium of photography characterizes their early work, evolving in the 1990s to include artist books, large-scale video projections, and installations. Incidentally, their first permanent public art commission is tied to the reconstruction of New York's infrastructure following the tragedy of September 11, 2001. The goal is to delineate context, process, and significance of the artists' foray into public art. An analysis and interpretation of artistic production, context, partnerships, process, scale and reception will reveal the transition from stellar gallery production to installation art and exceptional public art.

1.1 Methodology

This study investigates and contextualizes the transition of the works by Doug and Mike Starn from their early exhibitions in traditional gallery settings to large-scale,

interdisciplinary installations, permanent and temporary public art. My research rests on the pillars of secondary literature and primary sources. In my inquiry I am particularly interested in featuring the artists' voice regarding their work in the form of interviews, statements and writings. Of particular interest are Doug and Mike's creative and collaborative processes, noting especially the brothers' twinship. Further, urban and site-specific context, administrative process, as well as public reception are subjects for study.

The title of Doug and Mike Starn's first permanent public art commission, *See it split, see it change*, points to ongoing change and appears to refer to the complexity of the endeavor. I claim that the title thus references both administrative and artistic processes. Due to its public nature, the creation of permanent public art is based on extensive administrative, regulatory and transparency requirements. For this reason, I determined to investigate the process to gain a clearer understanding of the work.

To achieve successful outcomes, large-scale public art requires effective teamwork and outstanding communication skills of all parties involved. In public art the studio and creative process interface closely with a number of partners, usually a design team comprised of the commissioning entity, design professionals (architect, landscape architect, engineer, etc.), liaisons to governing agencies, and others. For large-scale public art commissions, artists usually engage a fabricator, who plays a central role in realizing the project, usually commencing early-on in the conceptual and design development phase, followed by production and installation. I will examine the materials and process of Doug and Mike Starn's major public art projects, such as the partnership between the artists and the project administrators, as well as the fabricators for the South Ferry Station commission, or the teams collaborating on the *Big Bambú* installation and other initiatives.

The partnership with the commissioning agency, engineers and other team members is an intricate part of the collaborative process. Reporting and transparency requirements need to be adhered to, which also impact development

of the work. Since South Ferry Station was funded by federal post-9/11 funds, it required the reconciliation of safety considerations with aesthetic goals. The implications of this challenge merit exploration. In my study, I address the following questions:

- How do the Starns' public art projects fit into the overall oeuvre with particular consideration of scale?
- What role do the artistic and logistical processes play and do they lead to conclusions regarding the artwork and its social and/or cultural impacts?
- Which conclusions can be drawn from the use of materials and iconography?

Because my investigation focuses on contemporary art, I was able to combine field studies with an analysis of existing literature, in line with Schlögel's directive: "Texts you can read, cities you need to enter. One needs to look around. Places you cannot read, rather one has to visit them, walk around them."¹ The work progressed in communication with artists Doug and Mike Starn. References to project management of the South Ferry Station public art project are scarce in the literature. Therefore, I reached out to MTA Arts for Transit director Sandra Bloodworth, and contractors, especially German glass and mosaic fabricators Mayer of Munich. Site visits, analysis and documentation complemented the interviews.

The artist duo Doug and Mike Starn, internationally renowned photographers since the mid-1980s, have undertaken significant installation art, temporary and permanent public art projects since the early 2000s. This study for the first time explores the duo's public art oeuvre, studies the nature of their life-long artistic collaboration and presents unpublished primary research material. It features the Starn brothers' evolution from the medium of photography to intermediality, installation art, and subsequent temporary and permanent large-scale public art commissions.

¹ Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2011). 23. (Quote translated by the author.)

A growing number of contemporary artists share a trajectory similar to the Starns, as evidenced by my research and introduced in the course of the book. Noteworthy are Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, or Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.² Doug and Mike Starn's path may thus serve as a case study on artistic evolution, from the workshop tradition and the individual artist genius toward an egalitarian extension of collaboration and equal partnership in contemporary studio practice. Typical also is a record of gallery exhibitions prior to the pursuit of public art.

1.2 At the Intersection of Photography and Intermediality

Chapter Two establishes Doug and Mike Starns' foundation in the medium of photography with special consideration of their status as twins, whose lifelong, collaborative practice commenced during their study at the art academy. The pair has continually pushed the limits of photography, while establishing it as their leading medium. First, they destroyed the myth of the pristine print (*Macabre Still Life*, 1983-1985) (Ill. 3), reintroducing the notion of photography as a unique work of art and introducing unprecedented large scale collage techniques (*Double Stark Portrait in Swirl*, 1985-1986) (Ill. 9). Parallel to working with the photographic print is their continuing exploration of materials to establish physicality for the medium of photography: *Stretched Christ* (1987) (Ill. 2), another study in scale, removes the photograph from the wall and turns it into a freestanding three-dimensional object.

Intermediality refers to interconnectedness and interdisciplinary work in the arts and literature, new media and communications, requiring the linking of at least two media. Schröter³ investigated the problem of intermediality, also researched by Helbig.⁴ On their artistic journey from photography to installations and public art,

² See Chapter 2.6 Collaborative Geniuses, as well as discourses on specific collaborative works at *Big Bambú* sites shared with the Starns within the respective chapters, i.e. Christo and Jeanne Claude in New York, or Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla in Venice.

³ Jens Schröter, "Discourses and Models of Intermediality," *Comparative Literature and Culture* Vol. 13, no. 3 (2011). 1-8.

⁴ Jörg Helbig, ed. *Intermedialität: Theorie und Praxis eines interdisziplinären Forschungsgebiets* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1998).

Doug and Mike Starn cross boundaries and migrate between media. Like many contemporary artists, they have transcended “the clearly separated ‘monomedia’.”⁵

Installation art denotes an artistic genre of three-dimensional artworks, which change the perception of a space. Typically, the genre refers to interior spaces, while I consider exterior works as public art. Both fields frequently feature a site-specific approach, or aim at an immersive engagement of the viewer. In Chapter Three, the Starns enter the realm of installation art with *Ramparts Café* (Ill. 18-20), first presented by the Tower of David Museum in 1995. Both site-specific and immersive, the multi-media displays in vitrines paired with a soundscape presage the transformation from photographer to inter-disciplinary artist and intermediality.

The events of September 11, 2001 – the destruction of the World Trade Center and the death of several thousand unsuspecting employees in the two towers – caused a caesura that was felt globally. New Yorkers’, Doug and Mike Starn’s *Fallen* series directly dealt with the experience, albeit in a delicate, private manner, with mark making on paper that had drifted from the World Trade Center to their studio (Ill. 49-52). Three years later, they would be invited to compete for their first public art commission as part of the City’s reconstruction. The impact of 9/11 warrants a comparison with individual artistic responses of other artists, such as the controversial exhibition of Eric Fischl’s *Tumbling Woman* (Ill. 53), or official New York City memorials dedicated to 9/11, like Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda’s *Tribute in Light* (Ill. 54), and the *National September 11 Memorial* (Ill. 55-56).

The Starns’ summer 2004 *Behind Your Eye* show at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase (Ill. 37-39), New York featured close to 80 photographs, artist books, a dual-channel video projection, and a Japanese-style walk-through screen, 10-feet-high and 50 feet in length. In Sweden, the duo opened *Gravity of Light* that fall, introducing an installation lit by a flickering, 50,000-watt carbon arc lamp (Ill. 40-43). Following on the heels of *In Your Eye*, the Starns entered the field of public art with an invitation by New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to

⁵ Schröter, "Discourses and Models of Intermediality." 6.

participate in the competition for the South Ferry Subway Station, which was slated for reconstruction with funds from the national 9/11 Recovery Act. Rebuilding of New York's infrastructure and the contextual framework of the Arts for Transit program are prerequisites for comprehending the South Ferry Subway Station commission, charted in Chapter Five (Ill. 57-65).

Two portfolio cycles carried the Starn Studio's MTA proposal: the *Black Pulse* (Ill. 21-25) series of scanned and digitally manipulated leaves and the *Structure of Thought* series of trees (Ill. 26-29). Technique, choice of subject matter and philosophy won the brothers their first public art commission in New York's public transit system, a 250-foot-long, glass-and-mosaic mural, analyzed in Chapters Six-Eight. *See it split, see it change* (Ill. 65-83), commissioned and owned by the MTA Arts for Transit program, was completed in December 2008 and dedicated in March 2009. South Ferry Station shares a close relationship with the *Structure of Thought* installation at the Neuberger Museum of Art, indicating the painstakingly consistent evolution of thought processes. The imagery of *See it split, see it change* at South Ferry Station presents leafless layers of silhouetted trees and historic maps of Manhattan on an undulating wall and staircases at a length of 250 feet and up to 14 feet tall. The project consists of multi-layered fused glass, as well as a variety of mosaics. A stainless steel fence of silhouetted trees completes the project.

The Starns' first outdoor commission was the stage design for the open-air theater in Aspen, Colorado. A July 26, 2008, lecture by the Dalai Lama at the Aspen Institute brought an invitation to create a fitting stage environment for the honored guest at the occasion of the Institute's Tibetan Arts and Culture conference. Doug and Mike engaged local school children in their stage design. *From One, Two; and From Two, One* (Ill. 93-97) emerged. Main elements of the design are Tibetan prayer flags with wishes for peace and paper-cut snowflakes.

While at work on *See it split, see it change*, Doug and Mike were struck by the inspiration for a mammoth walkable structure. The artists then began looking for an appropriately sized space. They discovered and began renting a former foundry, a 40,000-square-foot facility with 50-foot ceilings in upstate New York. By October

of 2008, they had completed *Big Bambú* (Ill. 98) in their new studio in Beacon, New York. Upon completion, the artists began to search for a venue to publicly exhibit their new bamboo construction, culminating in the installation at the Metropolitan Museum's Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden from April 27 to October 31, 2010 (Ill. 102-104). This 100-foot-long, 50-foot-wide and 50-foot-high installation was constructed of two simple materials: bamboo and climbing rope. During the course of the installation, Doug and Mike Starn and their team continually worked on site, reshaping and changing the piece, thus emphasizing process and change. In 2011 *Big Bambú* was recreated and exhibited from May 29 through June 15 at the 54th Venice Biennial next-door to the Guggenheim Palace, on the Venice campus of Wake Forest University (the former United States Consulate building) (Ill. 108-110). As with the photo series, the Starns realize variations of their installations at a succession of venues, thus emphasizing process, continuity and change.

1.3 Framework and Goals

Photography as Leading Genre

Photography has become a leading medium in contemporary culture because it serves both as an art medium and as documentation of any art that is created and written about. The latter part of my argument asserts that without photography contemporary culture could hardly exist. Furthermore, without photography contemporary art would lose its presence in culture, because contemporary society is built on and functions through the availability of the photographic image. The beginnings of this evolution rest on the principle that in a democratic society material and intellectual production are accessible to all citizens. The introduction of digital production and transmission of photographs has only recently overcome the limitations of past technology and now affords broad access to accurate reproductions of reality and open, global access via the Internet.⁶ Doug and Mike Starn entered this age of digital technology at the cusp of its implementation.

⁶ Wolfgang Kemp, *Foto-Essays: Zur Geschichte und Theorie der Fotografie* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1978). 20-21.

With their early photographs of iconic paintings like the *Mona Lisa*, the Starns reversed the practice of painters adopting photography. During the 1960s, German painter Gerhard Richter answered the tension between painting and photography by painting a series of eight large-scale, blurred canvasses based on pictures from his own amateur photo collection, including *Woman Descending the Staircase (Frau die Treppe herabgehend)* (Ill. 1).⁷ The monochromatic palette clearly points to a black-and-white photograph as the source of the painting. The distinctive, long horizontal brush marks of the entire canvas, however, underscore the painter's ability and liberty to model form with his medium to reveal limitations of photography. Where Richter introduced linear markings, the Starns introduced creases and folds by abusing the paper, equally resulting in an added visual layer.

Continuing on Richter's trajectory that deviated from the prevalent abstract and minimalist styles, American painters, Chuck Close, Richard Estes and Audrey Flack were among the first to launch *Photorealism*⁸ by utilizing a slide projector in the creation of painstakingly realistic canvases. Of course, the availability of color slides and the slide projector precipitated this development. Already inherent in the notion of painters relying on photography is the emerging advance of photography as a leading medium. Art now imitates photography, removing it one step further from reality.

Photography theory has been lagging behind the growing dominance of photography both in our visual culture and in gallery trends. In *The Meaning of Photography*, Kelsey and Stimson observe the "widening rift between the models we had inherited for understanding photography and the new social and material conditions of the early twenty-first century,"⁹ but fail to address the new dominance of the medium.

⁷ Stefan Gronert, *Alternative Pictures: Conceptual Art and the Artistic Emancipation of Photography in Europe*. In: Douglas Fogle, *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960-1982* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2003). 91.

⁸ According to Meisel, the term was introduced in the context of the Whitney Museum exhibition *Twenty-two Realists* in 1970. See: Louis Meisel, *Photorealism* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1980). 12.

⁹ Robin; Stimson Kelsey, Blake, ed. *The Meaning of Photography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008). VII.

The Impact of 9/11

September 11, 2001 shocked the world and shook New York, affecting all aspects of life, including cultural life. Doug and Mike Starn created some very personal responses in their *Fallen* series, but did not publicly speak to the disaster like others I will discuss. However, throughout their career the artists have remarked on their pursuit of “themes of impermanence and transience in their photo-based artworks”¹⁰, establishing a meditative view on the world and global events. As proto-typical photographers, their ongoing, intermedial investigation of light, its effects on objects, and on the viewer in the process of seeing, allow Doug and Mike Starn to offer palpable metaphorical allusions: “In almost every culture in the history of the world, light is used as a metaphor for thought, knowledge, intelligence...”¹¹ This philosophy centers their art practice, not the politics of the day.

The destruction of the 9/11 attacks led to major funding streams during its aftermath. At the site of the Twin Towers, the master plan for rebuilding a reconfigured World Trade Center (WTC) included a major memorial and documentation center. Demolished transportation infrastructure and public space needed to be rebuilt on site, while other congestion-prone areas were assessed for improved safety and emergency management. New York’s public transportation agency, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and its Arts for Transit program, received federal funds for rebuilding and improving mass transit across Lower Manhattan, which included percent-for-art money for the creation of the new public art project at the South Ferry Subway Station, a few blocks south of the World Trade Center.

Special consideration will be given to the collaborative processes in the creation of this iconic public art project at the subway station. The \$1 million public art commission was realized by the Starns from 2005 to 2008. Their work was

¹⁰ “*See it split, see it change*,” Starn Studio, www.starnstudio.com, (Oct. 1, 2011).

¹¹ “*Absorption + Transmission*,” Starn Studio, www.starnstudio.com (Oct. 1, 2011). – The *Absorption + Transmission* exhibition, a commission by the National Academy of Sciences, inaugurated in Washington DC in 2005.

embedded in the overall renovation and expansion of the station following the 9/11 World Trade Center attack a few blocks away.

The award-winning public art project¹² at South Ferry Station has major cultural significance. This statement gains additional momentum in light of the fact that the value and funding for art is regularly questioned, particularly for public art. Especially during periods of economic hardship, art budgets are diminished. Because of the ongoing fiscal crisis, well-established public art programs have been imperiled.¹³

In New York City and elsewhere, the far-reaching consequences of 9/11, led to a related increase in cultural production, particularly in the form of memorialization, and, in the short term, in public art funding. Museums and cultural institutions, however, experienced tightening budgets because of a severe drop in attendance figures and the focus of philanthropy on 9/11 relief funds.¹⁴ Revival of New York's cultural tourism took a few years and was partly induced by large-scale temporary public art installations of international renown, including Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Gates* (2005) in Central Park (Ill. 106), Olafur Eliasson's *Waterfalls* (2008) in the East River (Ill. 105), as well as Doug and Mike Starn's *Big Bambú* (2010) on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

1.4 Existing Research

Distinction between Temporary and Permanent Public Art

Doug and Mike Starn have created both temporary and permanent works. Brown and Rubin offer a clear definition of public art: "Public art is different from studio art or art exhibited in museums and galleries. Public art is accessible to the public,

¹² "Starn Twins Glass Art Project Wins Prestigious Urban Planning Award." *The Glass Quarterly Hot Sheet*, Nov. 21, 2009 <http://blog.glassquarterly.com/2009/11/21/starn-twins-glass-art-project-wins-prestigious-urban-planning-award/> (July 22, 2011).

¹³ Among others, the public art programs of Seattle and the State of Connecticut were under siege due to the fiscal crisis at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. The United States' first art program in public transit in Boston is no longer funded.

¹⁴ Compare attendance figures and report by Susana Torruella Leval, chair of the Cultural Institutions Group in New York City, cited by Kelly Devine Thomas, "The Road Ahead," *ARTnews* Vol. 100, issue 11 (Dec. 2001). 38-42.

it typically reflects an awareness of its site, both physically and socially, and, most importantly, public art involves community process in its creation.”¹⁵ This general description lacks a differentiation in process between temporary and permanent projects. Public agencies should be governed by this principle at all times because they are expending public monies and consequently are subject to public transparency and accountability.

While I would argue in favor of community engagement particularly for permanent works, I question its need for temporary installations in public spaces, particularly if funded and organized by private organizations, because those must undergo a permitting process administered by the governing agency of that site. Site permitting requirements in a private setting differ from those on municipal, state or federal land, even though all other permitting and legal frameworks apply, from fire codes to safety regulations and neighbor consent as regulated by the local governing authority.

Relevant Publications

To date, publications on Doug and Mike Starn consist primarily of exhibition catalogs published in the United States. The Starns were included in major contemporary art surveys, beginning with the *Whitney Biennial 1987*¹⁶, as well as two international exhibitions, *Binational*¹⁷ and *Metropolis: International Art Exhibition Berlin 1991*¹⁸. Andy Grundberg, photography critic for the New York Times, published his 1990 book in conjunction with an exhibition, which traveled to the Baltimore Museum of Art, the University of Houston and the Akron Museum of Art, among other venues.¹⁹

¹⁵ Mary Rubin Brenda Brown, *Public Art Funding* (Washington, DC: Americans for the Arts, 2000). 2.

¹⁶ *Whitney Biennial 1987*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1987).

¹⁷ David et al. Ross, ed. *The Binational: American Art of the Late 80s* (Boston, MA: Institute of Contemporary Art and Museum of Fine Arts, 1988). The exhibition toured German museums in Düsseldorf, Bremen and Stuttgart.

¹⁸ Christos M. Joachimedes, Norman Rosenthal, ed. *Metropolis: International Art Exhibition, Berlin 1991* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).

¹⁹ Andy Grundberg. *Mike and Doug Starn* (New York: Abrams, 1990). The corresponding exhibition *Doug and Mike Starn*, curated by Sarah Rogers Lafferty, traveled to: Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; Center for the Fine Arts, Miami, FL; Blaffer Gallery, The University of Houston, TX; The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH; The Akron Museum of Art, Akron, OH.

Doug and Mike Starn's own monographs, artist books and the Starn Studio website www.starnstudio.com document the brothers' enduring production and extensive professional record of the work created since the late 1990s.²⁰ Research of the duo's public art projects especially benefits from documentation on the site. *Gravity of Light*²¹ charts the Starns' studio work and temporary installations, published in conjunction with their 2012 installation organized by the Cincinnati Art Museum, the third iteration of this installation, first introduced at Stockholm's Färgfabriken Kunsthalle and in Pittsburgh. Texts by Doug and Mike Starn, complemented by curatorial essays, espouse a first-hand account of process and the philosophy of interconnectedness, compounding earlier contributions to more modest catalogs. Finally, the 2003 publication, *Attracted to Light*,²² represents the culmination of years of meticulous night photography, shooting nocturnal moths on black-and-white film. This homage to light celebrates the life of insects, while experimenting with motion, macro and night photography.²³

Scholarly essays, reviews, and press appear both in print and digital media. The permanent commission at the South Ferry Station, the temporary installations, and the traveling exhibitions are extensively reviewed in major art journals, weeklies and the daily press, both in print and online. In his writings on the South Ferry Station commission, James Gardner emerges as the only author considering the artwork within the framework of the architecture, a holistic consideration that is especially noteworthy.²⁴ A related video interview with the Starns produced by

²⁰ Doug and Mike Starn, "Mike + Doug Starn," Starn Studio, www.starnstudio.com. (Feb. 20, 2012)

²¹ ———, *Gravity of Light* (New York, NY: Skira Rizzoli, 2012). Featuring essays by James Crump and Jan Åman.

²² Mike and Doug Starn, *Attracted to Light* (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2003).

²³ The book includes prose from Victor Pelevin's *The Life of Insects*, extending the trajectory of Franz Kafka's famed novella, *Metamorphosis*. The contents thus place the title in the tradition of the artist book, literary or interdisciplinary tradition. In the course of their career, the Starns have self-published a number of limited edition artist books, complementing work cycles developed in the studio. The Starn Studio website offers a selection of these titles.

²⁴ James Gardner, "Crit: South Ferry Terminal." *Architect's Newspaper* (Jan. 21, 2009), http://archpaper.com/e-board_rev.asp?News_ID=3109 (Nov. 15, 2011).

Brian Hubbard²⁵ necessitates further analysis, because it is the only source that refers to the rhizomatic principles developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.²⁶

Beyond the scholarly discourse, the Starn brothers' dedication to beauty combined with their openness to popular appeal have garnered them attention in popular media and magazines. Together, these sources offer a rich compendium of impressions and receptions by scholars and art critics, public officials, and the general public. Combined with the personal interviews conducted, as well as site reconnaissance, they form a solid foundation for this first study of Doug and Mike Starn's foray into public art.

The studio artists Doug and Mike Starn ventured into public space after the September 11 attacks, marking a clear caesura in their oeuvre. By their own admission, they—like countless others, fellow New Yorkers, as well as people around the world—were deeply affected.²⁷ Initially feeling shaken, helpless, and distressed by the global chasm laid bare, many were shocked by their sudden realization of the worldwide political, cultural, and religious antagonism. Many reactions followed, last but not least, ongoing warfare, providing scholars with exponentially increasing new material for research in many disciplines.

For the purpose of this study, the review of publications on the cultural significance of September 11 has been limited to the U.S. and Germany in order to define a workable framework. Several collections of scholarly essays on the cultural impacts of 9/11 have been published to date. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln at University of Illinois/Urbana gathered an early compendium with the initial reactions of cultural studies scholars who had received an invitation to submit up to one thousand words, with a November 12, 2001 deadline.²⁸ Of course, such a publication can only contain gut reactions, rather than an in-depth study of impacts

²⁵ Brian R. Hubbard, "See It Split, See It Change: Doug and Mike Starn Install a Rhizomatic Tree Motif in a NYC Subway Station." *Cool Hunting Video*, (Mar. 2, 2010) www.coolhunting.com/culture/see-it-split-se-1.php (Nov. 15, 2011).

²⁶ The rhizomatic treatise was published by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

²⁷ Doug and Mike Starn, "Interview by Christina Lanzl," (New York, NY: Starn Studio Nov. 21, 2011).

²⁸ Norman Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln, ed. *9/11 in American Culture* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003). The November 12, 2001 deadline is noted in the "Introduction" on page XIV.

and consequences. Scholarly collections were edited by Poppe, Schüller and Seiler,²⁹ Irsigler and Jürgensen,³⁰ as well as Lorenz.³¹ In his cultural and geopolitical reflections, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit*,³² Karl Schlögel pointed to the inherent symbolism of 9/11 against the capitalist system and its damage to the democratic, open society exemplified in New York City. Overall, these compilations are less responsive to reactions detected in the visual arts, focusing instead on social and political contexts of more mass media-oriented cultural studies. Please see Chapter 4: The Catalyst: 9/11, for selected visual arts responses to 9/11.

Memory became relevant for the overall cultural context and the Starns' artistic oeuvre following September 11, particularly related to public art. Memories were channeled in the form of memorials that collectively and individually traced responses. Recent publications by scholars from the U.S. and Germany were considered in the context of this study. Erica Doss questioned the preoccupation of society with monuments in *Memorial Mania*,³³ while Aleida Assmann investigated expressions and changes of cultural memory as collective knowledge transcending time and space in *Erinnerungsräume*.³⁴ Related to cultural memory, Schlögel penetrated the importance of the locale to history by layering the individual spatial experience with a matrix of topography and mapping.³⁵

New Scholarly Research

This dissertation complements and expands the existing literature and adds significant new research as the first monograph devoted to Doug and Mike Starn's foray into public art. Working directly with the artists and their studio team provided access to primary sources unavailable until now, resulting in more thorough, well-rounded understanding and wider scholarly benefit. The

²⁹ Sandra Poppe, Thorsten Schüller, Sascha Seiler, ed. *9/11 als kulturelle Zäsur* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009). Of particular note is Thorsten Schüller's essay "Kulturtheorien nach 9/11": 21-38.

³⁰ Ingo Irsigler, Christoph Jürgensen, ed. *Nine Eleven: Ästhetische Verarbeitungen des 11. September 2001* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008).

³¹ Matthias N. Lorenz, ed. *Narrative des Entsetzens: Künstlerische, mediale und intellektuelle Deutungen des 11. September 2001* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004).

³² Karl Schlögel. "Lehrstück II: Ground Zero, 11. September 2001." In: Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit*. 30-35.

³³ Erica Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

³⁴ Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³⁵ Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit*.

opportunity to engage with the artists directly deepened research and understanding through their valuable, first-hand accounts and the access they offered to unpublished documents and files, artist books, catalogs and resources. The MTA Arts for Transit office provided access to additional unpublished resources and primary sources. Interviews were conducted with project partners, most notably Sandra Bloodworth, MTA Arts for Transit director. Project files pertaining to artist competition and proposal process, design and construction documents, as well as press releases, offered insights into working methods and processes. The study of the interaction between artist studio, commissioning partners and team members furthered a greater understanding.

2. The Starn Twins: Early Career, Style and Studio Practice

2.1 Biographical Background and Artistic Evolution

The oeuvre of Doug and Mike Starn distinguishes itself by a number of characteristics. First, the work explores spirituality and science, natural cycles and thought processes in relatively few expansive suites, subordinating the individual image to a work cycle: "The images are secondary to the series."³⁶ Second, the material quality of the exhibited objects is typically large-scale, composed of assembled modular images, whose individual elements often underwent an artificial aging process at the hands of the artists. Third, the work grew from the early experimental work solely exhibited in galleries and museums to include multi-media explorations and installations, followed by large-scale permanent and temporary public art projects in the new millennium.

With their early oeuvre of the 1980s and 1990s, Mike and Doug explored all the techniques and subjects that would infuse their public art of the 21st century. The key requirements for an artist to work successfully in the field of public art are an ability to understand scale, provide capacity, and – last but not least – work within complex administrative processes. Up to their early 40s, the brothers exhibited solely in galleries and museums, which can be considered as the lab spaces that charted their evolution from private to public space, and from indoor to outdoor environments.

Doug and Mike Starn, identical twins, were born in 1961 and grew up in the small, middle-class community of Absecon, New Jersey, northwest of Atlantic City with the Jersey Pine Barrens beyond.³⁷ As teens, the boys became interested in photography and enrolled in a photography course at Stockton State College in 1975. During their childhood, the brothers also engaged in family drawing competitions with their sister Linda, three years their senior. Although raised in

³⁶ Doug and Mike Starn quoted in: Robert Pincus-Witten, "Being twins: the art of Doug and Mike Starn," *Arts Magazine* Vol. 64, No. 2 (Oct. 1988). 75.

³⁷ A detailed biography of the Starns' early life is included in Grundberg, *Mike and Doug Starn*. 24-46.

the Methodist faith, the youngsters attended the local Roman Catholic high school, where they had difficulty adjusting to the discipline expected of them. For their senior year they were able to join their sister, who had moved to nearby Ocean City, where they graduated from the public high school. Their later exploration of religious subjects from the history of art has to be linked to their Protestant upbringing and exposure to Roman Catholicism, because their understanding of the Christian nomenclature attracted them to particular visual representations. The culmination of these experiences was emulated in *Stretched Christ* (Ill. 2), a central work at the 1987 Whitney Biennial, which is based on the painting by the 17th century, French Baroque painter Philippe de Champagne. The brothers further expanded their *Christ Series* into a traveling exhibition originating at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida.³⁸

As seniors in high school, Doug and Mike Starn faced choosing a career path, and for them the choice was clear: they agreed to attend the same academic institution and to pursue photography. Taking their portfolio to a college recruiting conference in Philadelphia, the brothers considered a number of art schools, though the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA) in Boston, Massachusetts (usually referred to as the Museum School) appealed most because it offered a flexible curriculum with great freedom of choice. This small school distinguishes itself by a non-traditional environment that fosters self-directed and interactive study without grades, focusing instead on development of the student's own voice accomplished mainly through critiques with faculty and students. In the SMFA's tight quarters, students are exposed to each other's developing work and are virtually forced to interact in limited, but vibrant, workshop space.

The Museum School was the right choice for the brothers, although they had received admission to all programs they applied to. During their first year, Doug and Mike still worked individually, but in their second year they embarked on their collaborative path. Each developed his talent in the creative environs of the SMFA's basement darkrooms and at their own, near-by Fenway studio where, Doug

³⁸ Doug and Mike Starn, *The Christ Series* (Sarasota, FL: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 1987).

reminisces, “We basically didn’t go to classes; we just worked in the darkroom.”³⁹ First working on 20-by-24-inch photo paper and later with square sheets, they began tiling images and joining them together with scotch tape, roughing up the photo paper and pinning up the resulting large-scale images with push pins. The paper itself became an obsession, after they were criticized about the imperfections of their prints. Doug and Mike Starn broke with the dictum of 150 years of photo tradition that painstakingly tried to preserve the unblemished print.

The black-and-white collage, *Macabre Still Life* (Ill. 3), a single skull assembled of 12 squares and a narrow sequence of strips at the bottom, features the typical creases and Scotch tape assembly. Created during their student days, between 1983-1985, the subject matter of a skull points to the pair’s proclivity to art historical quotations in the Postmodern tradition. Form and subject matter link the work to the *vanitas* still life of 17th century, Dutch painting. The motif of transience that appears in *Macabre Still Life* for the first time, emerged as the central theme in the Starns’ oeuvre, further consolidated following their exposure to Eastern philosophy and Buddhism in subsequent years.

2.2 Early Gallery and Museum Exhibitions

Already during their college years, the Starn Twins, as they became known, quickly gained local notoriety in the art community, partly because of their birth status, partly because of their unusual choice to pursue art together as a team even at this early stage of their development, and partly because of their rebellious spirit and art practice.⁴⁰ The Museum School’s Traveling Scholars Program extends the regular art academy education by an additional year of artistic inquiry. Mike and Doug applied for and received one of these competitive awards for post-graduate work and travel, culminating in an exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1985. The local art world began to take note, resulting in a group invitational and a solo exhibition at Stux Gallery in Boston that same year, as well as inclusion in the

³⁹ Andy Grundberg, *Mike and Doug Starn* (New York: Abrams, 1990). 27.

⁴⁰ I observed the aura surrounding the Starn Twins, because I lived in Boston and worked at neighboring Massachusetts College of Art and Design around that time.

contemporary photography exhibition *Boston Now: Photography* at the Institute of Contemporary Art. The following year, the Starns held their first New York solo exhibition at Stux Gallery, which had opened a second gallery there. A short time after, the Starns signed on with Leo Castelli Gallery, where they presented their work in 21 exhibitions between 1986 and 2005.

In 1987, the photography duo's early career peaked by inclusion in the Whitney Biennial, the only and largest overview of contemporary art in North America curated by a museum. The Whitney exhibition and the commercial art fairs, notably New York's Armory Show, Art Basel Miami Beach, or the Navy Pier show in Chicago, are the most important surveys in the country. An inclusion in the Whitney holds great prestige, both within the burgeoning New York art market and internationally. The brothers rose rapidly, summed up by Paul Richard:

They started with a bang. At the age of 24, barely out of art school [...], they become hot Manhattan art stars. They were chosen for the Whitney Biennial, Charles Saatchi of London began buying up their pictures. Before the '80s ended, the Starns had been exhibited at the Pompidou Center in Paris, at the Victoria Museum in London, and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Flash Art*, which in those days was the trendiest of art magazines, decided that the Starns belonged 'among the preeminent talents of our times.'⁴¹

What had caused such a stir? Richard's assessment of Mike and Doug Starn's "eerily singular vision"⁴² is noteworthy in the dual meaning of their unique artistic voice and in reference to their collaboration. An inquiry into Doug and Mike Starn's studio practice and style will reveal an utmost degree of immersion, continuity and insistence on questioning established art practices, which continues to serve as the underpinnings of their public art projects. The Starns' work is suffused with the creative energy of their collaboration, certainly benefiting from their birth status, enabling free-flowing, constructive, and positive communication.

The contentious art world of the 1980s proclaimed new artistic styles in rapid succession:

⁴¹ Paul Richard, "It Takes Two: The Starn Twins' Eerily Singular Vision," *Washington Post*, Apr. 17, 2005. N10.

⁴² *Ibid.* N1.

Indeed, much of the most intriguing art of the 1980s conflated the dichotomy of Neo and Post, making Post-modernism seem less the antagonist of Modernism than its inevitable companion or double. It was into this climate that Doug and Mike Starn [...] introduced their doubly radical version of photographic art [...]. They wanted to make art that leaped over the Neo-Post divide, that would appeal to the best instincts of a broad audience.⁴³

Whether Doug and Mike consciously elected their place within the art historical framework, is debatable, although these facts remain: New York's central art market, where the plurality of styles coexisted with the vibrant art scene, led Boston gallery owner Stefan Stux to open a satellite gallery, where he launched the Starns as major new talent, thus playing a key role in establishing their place at the forefront of the avant-garde.⁴⁴ Their photographic adaptations of Great Master painters, combined with their exploration of identity in their self-portraits, placed Mike and Doug's work within the Postmodern movement. The Postmodernist discussion of discrete authorship found its counterpoint in rising collaborative art, a topic the twins naturally had much to contribute to (see Chapter 2.6).

2.3 Photography as Leading Medium

When the Starn brothers chose photography, the medium had become so affordable and commonplace that cameras were typically a standard item owned by middle-class households, hobbyists set up their own, basic darkrooms at home, and photography classes were offered at the secondary school level, affording the Starn brothers their first class in the form of a birthday gift at age 13.⁴⁵

Departing from standard-format photography early on, the Starns almost from the beginning had to shoot their work twice: first, to produce the work itself and then again, for documentation or for publicity. I argue that this dual understanding of the work, the art photographer also *documenting* the work, affords both the photographic object as well as the print of the photographed object the status of

⁴³ Grundberg, *Mike and Doug Starn*. 20.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 29.

⁴⁵ Anne Kotzan, "Couplekunst," *Photo Technik International* (Jul./Aug. 2004). 47.

artwork. This practice also commenced the Starns' shift to intermediality. Beginning with the *Behind Your Eye* exhibition in 2004, the physical appearance of these images shares the characteristics of collage, such as the reproductions of the Neuberger installation in the exhibition catalog⁴⁶ and in Leffingwell's *Art in America* review.⁴⁷

Digital photography has become the DNA of communication as much as writing is. With the *Big Bambú* installation Doug and Mike created their own stage set and their own, unique subject matter in equal parts. Visitors to this interactive environment have a democratic experience in their opportunity to partake, document and interpret. The artwork exists in a multitude of visualizations, originating in the form of time-based and fine art practices, and as digital files that occupy cyberspace.⁴⁸ Authors of this large body of work are, of course, Doug and Mike Starn, followed by professional and press photographers, and countless individuals who photographed the work at close range or from afar, as visitors of the installation or taking pictures in the vicinity within the short exhibition timeframe. The digital files then offer the opportunity to infinitely manipulate the images, leading to more digital uploads in often downsized versions from large files on personal hard drives. An individual analysis of images that exist in the millions becomes impossible, necessitating computational, database-driven interpretation.

The late 20th century was marked by the advance of photography as a leading medium in the fine arts, linked to the advance of digital and reproductive technologies. Digital photography and reproduction of large-scale digital images, however, still dissatisfied many professional artists, including Doug and Mike Starn. Technology continued to improve, allowing the pair to attach a digital back – or *leaf* – to their camera to satisfy the reproduction requirements for large-scale fabrication after winning the South Ferry Station competition in 2005.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Doug and Mike Starn, *Behind Your Eye* (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, 2004). n.p.

⁴⁷ Edward Leffingwell, "Fields of Light," *Art in America* (Dec. 2004). 50-51.

⁴⁸ A November 23, 2012 Google Images search of *Big Bambú* produced over 1.3 million entries.

⁴⁹ Doug Starn, "Interview by Christina Lanzl." Nov. 21, 2011.

Throughout the 1990s Doug and Mike investigated *light*. In photography light, and exposure control the quality of the medium. But they went one step further: choosing *light* as their quintessential subject of investigation, they doubled the technical aspects of photography with the content of their artistic production. In addition, the iconography of light connotes *enlightenment*, developing into one of the brothers' omnipresent philosophical statements. Trained in the conceptual approach to contemporary art making, Doug and Mike approach photography as a tool for philosophical expression. The emancipation of the artist in driving the aesthetic connotations of their work has been evident from the beginning, a process that commenced with conceptual art, led by its most eloquent champion, Joseph Kosuth. His writings and explorations on the nature of art reached a high point in his 1969 essay, *Art after Philosophy*, in which he defined the conceptual nature of art: "Works of art are analytic propositions."⁵⁰ Equally, the Starns have always defined their work as conceptual, following Kosuth's doctrine that language reveals the character of art. The Starns define their work as metaphors that translate meaning, associations, or suggestions about their conceptual thinking.⁵¹

If photography is the Starns' core medium, publishing is a proven form to present photography. Their next body of work shines the macro lens on moths, the insect sensitive to and simultaneously attracted to light, leading to the 2003 publication of the brothers' first monograph with the same title. Here, photography as leading medium celebrates black-and-white photography, appearing in its waning days during the new heyday of high-definition digital color printing, leading me to make several assertions regarding the context of this particular artist book of photography:

- *Attracted to Light* is an ode to the craft of defining color through the contrasts of light and dark, thereby emulating the end of the era of black-and-white photography in a celebration of the genre.
- The medium of photography is placed within its historic roots and context,

⁵⁰ "Art after Philosophy." In: Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings 1966-1990* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). 20.

⁵¹ Kotzan, "Couplekunst." 47.

because the black-and-white motion photographs of fluttering nocturnal moths recall the early time lapse experiments of Eadweard Muybridge, who documented his lifework in the seminal, eleven volumes of *Animal Locomotion*.⁵²

- In an interdisciplinary, rather contemporary approach, the art of photography is married to and elucidated by the art of writing in Victor Pelevin's expressive prose, whose excerpts of *The Life of Insects* evoke Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, establishing yet another frame of reference and interpretation.

Guided by their eye behind the lens, the leading medium of photography channels infinite discovery in creative thought, material, and deed. Multi-layered meaning, deep thought processes and a caring, almost tender respect for the visible world that surrounds us, however hidden and disregarded it may be, suffuses the art of Doug and Mike Starn. Disregarding the publications and print editions, all major works by the Starns have been unique works of art, a characteristic also true of public art, where site-specificity is often required. Thus, the pair defeated the notion of a *print* medium as secondary fine arts genre in their photography-based works. Primarily accomplished by their focus on the creation of unique works, paired with size, they rivaled the large-scale paintings of dominating 1980s artists like Frank Stella, Robert Rauschenberg or Andy Warhol. Rauschenberg's Abstract Expressionist *combines* and *assemblages* featured large objects in the works, suggesting a link to the Starns' incorporation of hardware and other objects in their pieces, as in the fully three-dimensional sculpture *Sphere of Influence* (Ill. 17). In general, photography and the adoption of mechanical techniques and commercial image styles emerged as major trends, along with the use of industrial materials.

2.4 Large Scale

The desire and ability to work large-scale continues to guide the work of leading contemporary artists worldwide, closely linked to the vast scale of the major gallery spaces. The post-industrial vacancy of entire districts' factory buildings,

⁵² Collection of the Boston Public Library, made available copyright-free in the online archive www.muybridge.org (Nov. 28, 2011).

available at below-market-rate rents, created the necessary equation to spurn this cycle. Doug and Mike's photos of their studios reveal industrial spaces, typically divided into darkroom, woodshop, office, and assembly space (Ills. 4-7). The latter is always the largest, enabling large scale, experimentation, and preparation of a body of work for exhibition.⁵³

To create large-scale photography-based work immediately poses the question of serialization versus a contiguous image, dictated by the standard paper sizes. Jeff Wall, who exhibited large-scale color photographs he titled 'installations' beginning in 1977, solved the question of scale by printing his large-scale works on backlit color photo transparencies, a method typically used in bus stop advertising. A prominent early work is his restaged street scene, *Mimic* (Ill. 8). Jeff Wall's intense psychology and crisp color technology sublimely enhance the nondescript facelessness of the environment, elevated by the pristine quality of the photography tradition, whereas Doug and Mike Starn usually construct a single object in their rugged collages.

The invention of digital photography and large-scale printing still in its nascent stages in the 1980s, the photographer's only way to achieve size was by laying out a grid of individually printed sheets. As to the image itself, there are two approaches to the problem: one is to serialize individual images, the other to turn a contiguous image into a grid structure of vertical and horizontal cells. These methods, though the latter was the more radical concept, introduced a paradigm shift in photography. In the Starns' oeuvre, early large-scale, contiguous images of importance are the *Christ Series*, including their masterpieces *Stretched Christ* of 1985-1986, a taped, toned silver print collage of no less than 142 inches in length. (Ill. 2), and the self-portrait *Double Stark Portrait in Swirl* from the same time period (Ill. 9). Dispensing with borders on the individual sheets to achieve contiguous images, scratching and creasing the paper and collaging it together with transparent tape both on the back and the front, they called attention to materiality, while questioning photography in the tradition of Ansel Adams.

⁵³ This becomes evident, when comparing early photographs of studio spaces (see Grundberg, *Mike and Doug Starn*. 20, 22-23, 31) with later images (see Ill. 4-7).

Segmentation remains an important technique until Doug and Mike introduce large-scale digital printing with their *Black Pulse* series (2000-2007). Without exception, the later public art projects are also based on modular systems.

The phenomenon of serialization was a prominent art movement of the 1980s across artistic disciplines and continuing to this day. The encyclopedic approach of some artists, working on a theme for decades at times, entered the artistic discourse. Husband-and-wife team Bernd and Hilla Becher's renowned Minimalist black-and-white photographs of *Water Towers (Wassertürme)*, (Ill. 10), as well as other totemic, industrial real estate including coal silos, blast furnaces, lime kilns, grain elevators and oil refineries are an important milestone in serialization. They arranged the individual typologies of architecture in grids or rows, emphasizing similarities and differences, underscored by prevailing constants like light conditions, angle and size. The Bechers sold their immaculate photographs as unique prints, thereby establishing the notion of photography as individual, serialized print for the next generation of photographers.

Doug and Mike Starn found inspiration on their sister's horse farm, where they shot an image of two heads they printed in variations for the *Boston Now* exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art. Their own systematic approach to the project resulted in a series of large-scale works. One *Horses* collage (Ill. 11) relates a contiguous image, while the other version of *Horses* (Ill. 12) is comprised of individual sheets of the same image printed in variations. The two heads – again the theme of duality – are flipped or printed upside-down within individual modules. They are printed as toned silver prints, and assembled with tape. The ensuing pattern reads like an abstract frieze. The irregular black borders of the frame anticipate the jagged edges of the later, digital collages that visualize the installations (compare Ill. 37 and 40).

2.5 Appropriation

In March 1985, the Starns traveled to Paris on a twelve-day school-sponsored tour

as part of the SMFA's traveling scholars program, where they photographed the cityscape and inside museums. Their first experience of the art and culture of Europe led to their artistic breakthrough. Remarkably so, because American artists' European tour to polish craftsmanship and understanding was no longer considered a prerequisite. In fact, following World War II, New York had surpassed Paris as new capital of the art world. Following their radical new approach to scale in photography, appropriation became the Starns' next innovation.

Among the key characteristics of Postmodernism, the medium of photography lends itself to adaptation. For Doug and Mike, collage and the appropriation of Old Master paintings in their photo collages are synonymous with the recombinant Postmodern styles, dislodging direct historical or cultural contexts and associations within the late 20th century. I disagree with Joseph Jacobs, who denies the relevance of the source images because they become subject without the context surrounding the image: "These are not appropriation photographs designed to reconstruct – or expose – the context in which the original art was made. Who made the objects, when, or for what reason becomes irrelevant."⁵⁴ The art historical frame of reference and the originals' iconography, along with the reissuing of the work in the contemporary medium of photography, clearly influence this reinterpretation of the Old Master paintings.

While the stylistic references are clear, Doug Starn differentiates between the intent of Postmodernism and appropriation related to the brothers' work:

We rework the Old Masters because they inspire us—and this is where we differ from Appropriationism (a Post-Modern school of artists who use pre-existing images to comment ironically on contemporary society). That movement is rooted in cynicism, but we truly love the images we rework. The whole idea of how art's been affecting people for centuries and what beauty can do to people—this is an incredibly rich area of human experience.⁵⁵

Beauty, indeed, emerges as a theme in art and criticism of the 1980s. In discussing

⁵⁴ Joseph Jacobs. *Doug and Mike Starn: The Christ Series*. In: Starn, *The Christ Series*. 5.

⁵⁵ Kristine McKenna, "Double Vision," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 21, 1990., http://articles.latimes.com/1990-10-21/entertainment/ca-4390_1_art-world (Mar. 23, 2012).

beauty, the question of the decorative in art confronts Modernism in its objection to these traditions. Art historian Irving Sandler established the term “commodity art,” comparing the Starn methodology to Philip Taaffe’s (Ill. 13). Reintroducing decorative patterns into contemporary art, Taaffe appropriated motifs from paintings by admired artists including Bridget Riley, Ellsworth Kelly and others. Both the Starns and Taaffe were included in the 1988 German-American traveling exhibition *The Binational*, held in Boston at the Institute of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, and at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf, Germany.⁵⁶ Sandler writes:

Taaffe was not the only artist who appropriated the imagery of other artists because of his ‘infatuation’ with it. Mike and Doug Starn [...] did so too, but in a shrewd twist they used the camera to appropriate painting [...]. Moreover, they made their photographs simulate handmade paintings [...]. Other composite photoworks were elaborately framed, the frames simulating relief sculptures.⁵⁷

The occurring transfer between two different media is an important observation that needs to be taken into account when interpreting the Starns’ creations, because all subsequent installations and public art projects are developed and executed using this instrument.

The Starns’ adaptation of the images from the Paris trip became important content of the pair’s early work, most notably a series based on Philippe de Champagne’s *Christ* painting.⁵⁸ *Stretched Christ* (Ill. 2 and 16) became Doug and Mike’s first freestanding object, initially shown at Stux Gallery and included in the Whitney Biennial, *The Christ Series* also leading to their first museum solo exhibition. The twelve-foot-long *Stretched Christ* retains the original height of the painting, while extending it to Mannerist extreme with inserted intervals of alternate exposure, taped and encased horizontally in a shallow frame resting on two-foot posts in reference to the entombment, thus returning Champagne’s painting to three-dimensional space and turning the medium of photography into sculpture. “Perhaps

⁵⁶ Ross, *The Binational: American Art of the Late 80s*.

⁵⁷ Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: from the late 1960s to the early 1990s*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998). 511.

⁵⁸ Philippe de Champagne (1602–1674), *Le Christ mort couché sur son linceul (The Dead Christ on his Shroud)*, before 1654. Oil on linen, 27 x 77 1/2 inches. Collection Musée Du Louvre, Paris.

the most salient aspect of the Starns' method is their emphasis on the physical qualities of the photograph, virtually transforming the medium into sculpture. One walks around this enormous photograph as one would a free-standing sculpture,"⁵⁹ wrote curator Joseph Jacobs in his exhibition essay for the Ringling Museum exhibition. The Starns' immersion in religious subject matter continued later with comparative work on the world religions, first in the *Ramparts Café* installation at the Tower of David Museum in 1995-96, and later dealing with Buddhist enlightenment, the latter finding its expression as a public art project in the 2008 state design for the Aspen Institute's conference on Tibetan culture.

Other paintings of the Old Masters the Starns photographed on their European sojourn were Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and a self-portrait by Rembrandt. The *Mona Lisa* inspired important works, such as *Large Mona with Plexi, 1985-88* (Ill. 14), or *Double Mona Lisa with Self-Portrait, 1985-1988* (Ill. 15). In the former, the collage in sepia tones fractures the image and emphasizes the head and décolleté, while the rest of the work remains obscured in pale tones. Thereby, the core subject of the master painting becomes more important in the Starns' monochromatic reinterpretation. The second work, *Double Mona Lisa with Self-Portrait*, features a ghost reflection of the twins in the protective shield, while the portrait is placed side by side on two image layers in reference to their own dual identities. The outlines of the two also prove that they were on site in person, a playful but nevertheless poignant allusion to the long tradition of artists traveling to study the masters in the original. They describe their encounter:

We were tourists like everyone else. When you go to Paris you want to see the *Mona Lisa*. When we were there, we wanted to record ourselves with it. So we photographed our reflections on the Plexiglas box that surrounds it. It's probably the most famous – the most photographed – picture in the world. There are other Da Vincis that we like more than this one, but you come to the *Mona Lisa* with a whole set of expectations. You really think it's going to affect you when you see it, but it didn't do anything for us at first. The more we looked at it, though, the more we liked it.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Joseph Jacobs. The Christ Series. In: Starn, *The Christ Series*. 7. The exhibition was organized by the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, FL and traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

⁶⁰ Starn Twins: Doug and Mike Starn, interview by David Joselit and Trevor Fairbrother. In: Ross, *The Binational: American Art of the Late 80s*. 183-184.

In creating the *Double Mona Lisa with Self-Portrait*, Doug and Mike used the medium of photography successfully to document the fulfillment of this leg of their apprenticeship, parleying the faint shadow they cast on the famed painting, which in turn spurred them on to master their own medium and style. In the typical bent pose of the photographer adjusting his lens one of the brothers also appears to be bowing in reverence before *La Gioconda*. The *Double Mona Lisa with Self-Portrait* draws in and causes breathlessness in the viewer for any and all of these reasons, in line with Assmann's assessment that the *Mona Lisa* can be considered "a reflection of the culturally unconscious," because she conveys the timeless, smiling mystery of women throughout history "that summons up the spirit of the eternally feminine through a litany of allusions."⁶¹ The young artists were drawn to the work's complex history, while weaving new, contemporary meanings through their own interpretation. The very complexity of this double-double (self-)portrait bestows mastery. Reference and self reference, reestablishing the gallery setting and the scale of the painting inside its frame, allows the viewer to step into the same voyeuristic plane with the artists, thus becoming a participant in the artists' work. The participatory nature introduced here culminates in the twins' interactive public art installations realized in later years.

Doug and Mike Starn's early photo-collages are black-and-white or feature sepia tones with dark zones dominating the images. Somber and fragile, these captivating works display an ostensibly disrespectful treatment of the material, while at the same time presenting graphically robust imagery. *Double Mona Lisa with Self-Portrait*, taped together on front and back with invisible tape and set in a massive, tri-part wood frame with push pins, marks a milestone in the young artists' development as the first major large-scale contiguous collage. To Doug and Mike Starn the frame is an important part of the work:

We think a beautiful frame is exciting; it can draw you in. There's nothing wrong with dressing up art; it doesn't change the art or take away from it. We think, it's important to get excited and involved with an image, and if the frame helps that happen, that's good. We were especially struck by that in the

⁶¹ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*. 220.

Louvre, where one is just bombarded by the frames.”⁶²

This attention to the materiality of both the image and its presentation continues as a trademark and foundation for Doug and Mike’s public art projects. The searching quality of the work, continually exploring new dimensions, is an unwavering characteristic.

2.6 Collaborative Geniuses

The biggest disadvantage to being a twin is that it's like having a mirror in front of you everywhere you go, but as far as our work, being twins is a tremendous help. Each piece starts long before we actually get down to making it, and it's great being able to talk our ideas through with each other every day.⁶³

Doug Starn reveals the nature of his relationship with Mike that unlocks a deep level of communication and collaboration, likely unknown to non-twins. Doug and Mike Starn are the first identical twin artists in the history of art engaged in a life-long collaboration, pronouncedly summed up in their assertion: “We complete each other’s ideas.”⁶⁴ This unique phenomenon is indeed fascinating as part of the twins’ artistic voice. Robert Pincus-Witten has pointed out, “with the Starn Twins we have the rarest situation of all, a hyper-identification on twinship that leads to the making of single works.”⁶⁵ Pincus-Witten researched twin artists in his 1988 essay *Being Twins*, finding that Doug and Mike Starn were preceded in the United States by identical twin artists Ivan LeLorraine and Malvin Marr Albright, the latter painting under the pseudonym Zsissly, and Ethel and Jennie Magafan during the first half of the 20th century.⁶⁶ Painters Carol and Elaine Anthony, born in 1943 and educated at the Rhode Island School of Design, are known for their semi-abstract works inspired by architecture.⁶⁷ In contrast to Doug and Mike, these twin

⁶² Ross, *The Binational: American Art of the Late 80s*. 183.

⁶³ McKenna, "Double Vision." http://articles.latimes.com/1990-10-21/entertainment/ca-4390_1_art-world (Mar. 23, 2012).

⁶⁴ Kotzan, "Couplekunst." 47.

⁶⁵ Pincus-Witten, "Being twins: the art of Doug and Mike Starn." 72.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 72.

⁶⁷ Carol and Elaine Anthony had a retrospective at the Neuberger Museum of Art in 1996, following Elaine’s death, titled *Shared Beginnings/Separate Passages: Retrospective Exhibitions of the Work*

predecessors shared the medium of art in their work, but not the collaborative approach.

Identical twins share genetic identity, including their brains, as opposed to fraternal twins. Inherited predisposition of the former leads to an unusual closeness, while maternal twins may experience greater competitiveness.⁶⁸ Observing the two during my research, I detected Doug and Mike's highly evolved division of labor and sharing of specific tasks. They do, of course, create collaborative art, going so far as to eliminate individual boundaries of authorship. Mike, for instance, manages external communications for the Starn Studio, while Doug is the computer software expert. Writing, on the other hand, is a shared responsibility with both serving as each other's editors, resulting in extraordinarily well-written, poetic prose accompanying each cycle and many exhibitions of the entire oeuvre: "It takes us forever to write something."⁶⁹ This approach allows each brother a certain level of specialization and streamlined studio operation, while avoiding duplication of effort and potential miscommunication.

Collaboration as a theme emerged in contemporary art in the 1960s and 1970s, spearheaded by artists like Gilbert & George or the Guerilla Girls who paved the way for later generations of collaborators. Englishmen Gilbert & George embraced their joint public persona after meeting in college. They staged their first public performances in the late 1960s and began to define themselves as living sculptures, but had developed their renowned tiled photographs by 1980. In 1984 they were shortlisted for the first Turner Prize, which they won in 1986. Doug and Mike were certainly familiar with Gilbert & George's work at that time and share the theme of collaboration, self-portraiture, and large-scale rasterized photography, a connection also pointed out by McKenna.⁷⁰

of Carol Anthony and Elaine Anthony. In 2004, the *In Your Eye* exhibition at the Neuberger Museum featured new work by Doug and Mike Starn.

⁶⁸ For studies on the psychology and unique experience of twins see: Maxine Rosenberg. *Being A Twin, Having a Twin*, New York 1985, or Helen Koch. *Twins and Twin Relations*, Chicago 1966. John Lash wrote a comprehensive overview on the representation of twins in art history: John Lash. *Twins and the Double*, London 1993.

⁶⁹ Starn, "Interview by Christina Lanzl." Nov. 21, 2011.

⁷⁰ McKenna, "Double Vision." http://articles.latimes.com/1990-10-21/entertainment/ca-4390_1_art-world (Mar. 23, 2012).

The burgeoning phenomenon of collaborative practices in contemporary art akin to that of the Starn Twins was aptly coined by Maria Lind as “the collaborative turn”,⁷¹ paralleling the nomenclature developed by Doris Bachman-Medick (*Cultural Turns*, 2007, which was preceded by Karl Schlägel’s observations regarding the ‘spatial turn’, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit*, 2003.) in her groundbreaking cultural studies theory reflecting new cultural norms of migratory societies at the turn of the millennium. Politicizing collaborative practices, Suzy Gablik observed: “We are beginning to perceive how, by disavowing art’s communal dimension, the romantic myth of autonomous individualism has crippled art’s effectiveness and influence in the social world.”⁷² Ultimately, Gablik argues in favor of a political dimension of art, where the cultural discourse bears an influence on the progress of society. Although Doug and Mike Starn are collaborators and have created community-based art, in their work and actions they have always fiercely protected their independence. However, their work has been open to a wide range of interpretation.

In developing a theory of collaboration, Joseph Hart introduced the apt term “collaborative geniuses,” replacing the “solitary genius” model.⁷³ But such a partnership, particularly in the creative arena, where artists are usually working without the backing of large institutions, requires self-reliance and private resources. Vera John-Steiner, an authority on creativity, dedicated a chapter of her monograph *Creative Collaboration* to collaboration among artists, and the particular role of trust:

Trust between collaborators often contributes to the heightened self-confidence needed to overcome the weight of artistic tradition. In addition to trust, partnerships can support a person’s willingness to take risks in creative endeavors [...]. Risk taking is a particularly urgent concern for young artists who are faced with the challenge of gaining recognition

⁷¹ Maria Lind: The Collaborative Turn. In: Maria Lind Johanna Billing, Lars Nilsson, ed. *Taking the Matter into Common Hands : on contemporary art and collaborative practices* (London, UK: Black Dog Publishing, 2007). 15.

⁷² Suzi Gablik: Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism. In: Susanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995). 77.

⁷³ Joseph Hart, "Working Together: Toward a Theory of Collaboration," *Public Art Review*, no. 38 (Spring/Summer 2007). 39.

while also testing their own worth and promise.⁷⁴

John-Steiner also notes that the questions collaborators typically address “include care and conflict, fusion and separation, trust, individual artistic identity, and partners’ negotiations about the ownership of ideas.”⁷⁵ Doug and Mike Starn certainly addressed these issues at the beginning of their artistic collaboration during their second year of art school. At this early stage in their careers and with the advantage of their twin identities, they were able to forge an intimate collaborative methodology that led to almost instant success. By the late 1980s, they confidently describe work in the studio:

We have contact sheets sitting around for years, and finally we get to an image, and if we really like it, we just keep on printing it. [...] Most of the work comes out of conversations. We talk a lot more than we actually work; we have a lot of arguments. We start with an image. We look at contact sheets, or we’ll think of an image to photograph. And we don’t always know who took which photograph, but that doesn’t really matter. We both have the same abilities with the camera.⁷⁶

Collaborative relationships are increasingly popular among artists, especially in the field of public art, because large commissions require teamwork in developing concept and design, then further developing, permitting, fabricating and installing the work together with the client and stakeholders, as appropriate. Relationships are typically forged, because the partners harness unique skill sets and a common sense of purpose or ideas. Renowned collaborators Christo and Jeanne-Claude⁷⁷ or Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen were both romantic and artistic partners; like many other partnerships, they produced a shared body of work.⁷⁸

A common denominator for these internationally renowned artists is the large scale and public character of their work. These prerequisites require a division of

⁷⁴ Vera John-Steiner, *Creative Collaboration* (Oxford University Press, 2000). 79.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 76.

⁷⁶ Starn Twins: Doug and Mike Starn, interview by David Joselit and Trevor Fairbrother. In: Ross, *The Binational: American Art of the Late 80s*. 185.

⁷⁷ Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s *Gates* lined the walkways of Central Park in 2005, a few years before the Starns installed *Big Bambú* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, directly adjacent to the park. Since critics pointed out the connection between the two projects, the comparison in the working methods, particularly the specialization of Jeanne-Claude in the business negotiations of public art projects, is further outlined in Chapter 11.2: Interpretation

⁷⁸ Hilarie Sheets, "Dynamic Duos," *ARTnews* (Feb. 2011). 88.

labor. Typically, project managers or studio assistants serve as support staff, if an artist maintains a sole studio proprietorship. In artistic collaboration, a close personal relationship is the prerequisite for a lasting partnership. Until her death in 2009, Jeanne-Claude specialized in the business negotiations and project management for Christo's joint undertakings.⁷⁹ In Doug and Mike's case, both equally contribute to the artistic creation. However, as noted above, Mike takes on the more active role in project management and client interface, while Doug contributes additional software skills. Noteworthy is that both Christo and Oldenburg had successful solo careers before launching their partnerships, thus officially acknowledging the partner. I see this as the partners' emancipated way of thinking. It is true, though, that critics disparaged van Bruggen's achievement because she lacked an individual career preceding her collaborative work.⁸⁰ The Starns, due in part to their unusual closeness as identical twins, chose artistic collaboration while entering the field as professionals together. Therefore, their equal recognition and dual presence in presenting the work has always been understood as second nature to their work.

In 2011, the Starns installed *Big Bambú* at the Venice Biennial, the same year Lisa Freiman, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, commissioned Puerto Rico-based multi-media artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla to exhibit in the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennial (Ill. 111), featuring an artist collaborative for the first time.⁸¹ Allora commented on their selection: "It does in a way legitimize our type of practice as being an equally valid form of producing art."⁸² This assessment demonstrates an awareness of the increasing collaborative artist studios where partners are equally acknowledged. Doug and Mike Starn's twinship and their decision to form a team came at a time when this approach became increasingly common. In their consistency, they both led and participated in cementing the practice.

⁷⁹ "Christo and Jean-Claude." *Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School* (Sept. 23, 2008), www.pon.harvard.edu/events/the-2008-great-negotiators/

⁸⁰ Sheets, "Dynamic Duos."

⁸¹ See Chapter 11.3 for a discussion of the respective sites and projects.

⁸² Sheets, "Dynamic Duos." 87.

3. The Installations

3.1 Transition from Portfolio Work to Large-Scale Installation Art

Important in the development from photography to public art are the Starn installations, all realized in partnership with museums. In applying the term installation, one has to differentiate between an *installation of art* – an arrangement of an exhibition featuring wall-mounted art – and a heuristic or exploratory environment, as defined by Bishop: “‘Installation art’ is a term that loosely refers to the type of art into which the viewer physically enters, and which is often described as ‘theatrical’, ‘immersive’ or ‘experiential’.”⁸³ Juliane Rebentisch similarly states: “In the broadest sense, the art of installation is obviously an art form that has to do with space.”⁸⁴

Rebentisch delves into the philosophy of installation art by examining critical writings grouped around the three core questions of theatricality, intermediality and site specificity. While her analysis of critical writings by key philosophers and authors of the visual and performing arts in Europe and the United States (including Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida and Martin Heidegger; Michael Fried, Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Kraus) provides deep insights into the developing theory on the emerging genre of installation art, this historical approach misses the important question of interactivity: the relationship and active dialogue between the individual and the installation. To launch or harness the viewer’s perception and reaction is an intricate component of installation art.

The Starns probed installation art beginning with the salon-style hanging at the Whitney Biennial in 1987 and continued with their first immersive room installation at the Tower of David Museum in 1995. The year 2004 marks two major installations: the first of the *Gravity of Light* environments in Stockholm and *Behind Your Eye* at the Neuberger Museum of Art, which led to their first public art

⁸³ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005). 6.

⁸⁴ Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, trans. Daniel Henrickson (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012). 141.

commission in New York City.

Photography provided the point of entry to Doug and Mike to probe other art genres, including but not limited to sculpture, artist books, video and installation art. At the 1987 Biennial exhibition the duo chose a salon-style installation for their work, pairing wall-mounted with three-dimensional work (Ill. 16). The layout negates the standard hanging technique of spacing works apart. Unconventional also was the combination of framed works and prints affixed directly to the wall, as well as the juxtaposition of images with irregularly cut, black strips of exposed photo paper. They appear like waste elevated to exhibition status, but also point to the raw material used to make the work. An element of surprise and discovery enhances the duo's first freestanding work, *Stretched Christ* (Ill. 2), because its primary viewing angle is from above. The portraits and still life objects lack an apparent theme, but the collaged process ties the grouping together, elevating the materiality of the object above the subject matter. The exploration of new materials, indeed, is a driving force in the Starns' work.

The exploration of photography as thematic focus, plus stepping outside of the confines of the darkroom led to a wide range of work. A penchant for mixed-media photographic collages assembled with pipe clamps led to a new body of wall-mounted, freestanding as well as suspended works, such as *Sphere of Influence* in 1990/91 (Ill. 17), and sharpened their spatial ambitions. *Sphere of Influence*, homage to photography and the sun, is a 14-foot diameter, planet-shaped kinetic sculpture constructed of steel tubes, ortho film and clamps. Many years later, this work provided inspiration for *Big Bambú* (see chapter 11). The first true room-size installation art project, an immersive, multi-sensory environment, was realized with *Ramparts Café* (Ill. 18-20) at the Tower of David Museum in Jerusalem in 1995-96 (see chapter 3.2). This and most other installations since then have been realized at multiple venues. The San Francisco Friends of Photography at the Ansel Adams Center presented *Size of Earth* in 1997, a reduced version of *Ramparts Café*, followed by the 2001 installation at the Jewish Museum of New York.

Parallel to the installations occurring at multiple venues, the photographic series

are arranged in the *Absorption of Light* portfolio, which forms the basis for installations and public art. The portfolio's significance as a foundation for the installations and public art necessitates a careful review. A brief overview follows below, with a detailed examination of the correlations conducted in the context of the chapters on the installation and public art projects.

The *Absorption of Light* Portfolio

In 2000, the Starns started four new bodies of work, which they combined in the *Absorption of Light* portfolio in 2002. The cycles were comprised of *Black Pulse*, *Attracted to Light*, *Structure of Thought* and *Toshodaiji*. *Black Pulse* (Ill. 21-25) features desiccated leaves, which are thematically linked to the tree imagery of *Structure of Thought* (Ill. 26-29), while *Attracted to Light* (Ill. 30-32) captures moths in nighttime photographs. Lastly, the *Toshodaiji* suite (Ill. 33-36) introduces sculptures of renowned, Japanese Buddhist monks shot during an invitational residency at the Nara temple complex in 2000.⁸⁵

Conceptually, the *Absorption of Light* portfolio emerged from the brothers' investigation of sun and light during the first half of the 1990s. Starting in spring 2003, this diverse portfolio traveled in an international tour of Europe, Japan, and the United States for three years with varying constellations of exhibited works at consecutive venues:

Absorption of Light combines for the first time four bodies of work from the last five years exploring their metaphors of light through real symbols of the 'gravity of light': leaves, trees, moths, and a blind 8th-century monk and reformer of Buddhism. It encompasses the artists' broad spectrum of media, including computer-generated prints on rice paper, hand-coated silver emulsion on paper and video.⁸⁶

Three of these series have also been realized as installation or public art projects: the notions of circulatory systems and change of the *Structure of Thought* and *Black Pulse* would carry the South Ferry Station concept, while *Toshodaiji* fomented the

⁸⁵ In-depth analysis of individual series is presented in conjunction with the public art commission it influenced or led to.

⁸⁶ Lies Declerck, "Absorption of Light," *Janus* (Dec. 2002). n.p.

Starns' involvement with Buddhist thought. The photographic portraits of Ganjin and Gyoki, the two principal monks of Japanese Buddhism, led to an invitation in 2008 to create the stage design for the Dalai Lama's public lecture at the Aspen Institute in Colorado. The fourth cycle, *Attracted to Light*, the Starns developed as their first major independent monograph, published by Powerhouse Books in 2003. *Attracted to Light* represents the culmination of years of meticulous photography, shooting nocturnal moths on black-and-white film.

A substantial, well-illustrated essay pairing artist statements with examples from the four series was published by the journal *Janus*.⁸⁷ A review indicates the technical commonalities: joining flora and fauna, the larger-scale works in the portfolio share tiling and creased paper revealing the hand of the artist. Executed in black-and-white or monochromatic earth tones, a single object is central to each work in a continuation of the Starns' known style. In its alignment, *Absorption of Light* bridges the transition of photography from a darkroom to a digital application (including video), while demonstrating continual artistic control. From a curatorial perspective, the iconography of this collection of images appears incongruent at first sight, but the investigation of light clearly reinforces the underlying thought processes.

Transition to Large-scale Installation Art

The Starns' transition from traditional art exhibitions to installation art took a significant turn in 2004, with the *Behind Your Eye* installation at the Neuberger Museum of Art (Ill. 37-39), followed a few months later with the first *Gravity of Light* installation (Ill. 40-42) in Sweden. The duo was now exploring apace the overlap of the laws of physics concerning the absorption of light by objects with the medium of photography. The Starns' first installation project, *Rampart's Café* (chapter 3.2), was realized as early as 1995 at the Tower of David Museum in Jerusalem. The transition to large-scale installation art took place inside museums, with a detailed review following. The brothers' deepening investigation of installation art continually builds on their interest in exploring the boundaries of their first medium, photography, while continually experimenting with new

⁸⁷ Ibid.

materials. This kind of cross-disciplinary artistic discourse has been interpreted by Rebentisch: “[...] The specificities of each medium become the *object* of an artistic production that confronts [...] conventions freely – but not from a position of simple ignorance. This artistic production has rightly dismissed rigid definitions of genre.”⁸⁸ As discussed in chapter 3.3, the Starns presented the Neuberger show as a holistic environment that not only became the stepping stone to their first public art commission at South Ferry Station in New York, but also deepened the metaphorically laden *immersive* installation first introduced at the Tower of David Museum. Since then, the Starns’ major projects have been comprised of interactive installations and public art endeavors.

In November 2004, the Starns opened their first “factory” installation at Färgfabriken Kunsthalle (Ill. 40-41), a former paint factory turned art museum in Stockholm, Sweden (chapter 3.4). With *Gravity of Light*, the pair for the first time controlled the light conditions inside the space with a carbon arc lamp they had rebuilt following a Victorian design (Ill. 42). In the United States, *Gravity of Light* has been presented in partnership with museums or galleries at non-traditional art venues, like the Pipe Building in Pittsburgh (Ill. 43-45) and Cincinnati’s Holy Cross-Immaculata Church (Ill. 46-47). At these sites, the art installations draw attention to buildings that have been neglected or closed. Consequently, with this work, the Starns support urban revitalization, a major current concern in the cultural and urban planning communities of post-industrial cities worldwide, while continuing to explore the boundaries of art and photography.

3.2 Ramparts Café, Tower of David Museum

Ramparts Café (Ill. 18-20) embodies the Starns’ first coherent, interactive art installation at the Tower of David Museum, shown by the Jerusalem School of Photography in 1995-1996 in commemoration of Jerusalem’s 3000-year history.

⁸⁸ Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*. 122. Of course, combining individual media is also characterized as intermediality. Hence, installation art is an intermedial genre. Rebentisch further assesses the anti-objectivist tendency of installation art (p. 140), but fails to recognize that the medium of photography serves to document and preserve the existence of time-based art.

The installation is rooted in the brothers' investigation of light and the sun, which initially took shape in the form of a unique series of light-boxes and illuminated books. Now, their first room-size installation intensified the duo's spatial explorations. The city of Jerusalem as a location presents a place laden with symbolism and history, termed by Assmann as an "exemplary place of memory,"⁸⁹ whose central historic significance is related to the interactive experience with God. The ongoing religious and political war over dominance inspired the Starns to hone in on dialog in their installation concept.

The *Ramparts Café* installation not only speaks to the intermingling crowds in the streets of a heavily fortified city, but also implies the containment and separation inflicted by walls. The chosen concept of the café as a meeting place invoked the bustling life of the old inner city. The installation consisted of three transparent Plexiglas tables with random, all-glass café tableware, including ashtrays in use, set to a soundscape of multicultural prayer songs and chants. The shallow vitrines – *Stretched Christ* of 1987 serving as precursor – contained worn copies and pages of core religious texts. The world religions tied to Jerusalem and the Middle East are each represented by a copy of the Koran, the Dead Sea scrolls, and the Bible. These traditional texts were complemented by the Starns' own texts and notes printed on transparent film.⁹⁰

Employing vitrines as an exhibition strategy for contemporary conceptual art is a postmodernist version of this traditional display, borrowed from the science museum. The artist indicates a scientific methodology based on research and findings for presentation. The Starns were working in a context of other artists producing in this manner. Fellow New York artist Roxy Paine (Ill. 48) showed his critically acclaimed *Dinner of the Dictators* at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, where minute, absurdly mocking, details from history awaited the viewer inside a display case for a study up close: the taxidermied favorite meals of notorious despots such

⁸⁹ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*. 288-291.

⁹⁰ Diana Stoll, "Doug and Mike Starn," *Aperture* Issue 146 (Winter 1997). 22.

as Genghis Khan, Napoleon, Hitler and Suharto.⁹¹

Roxy Paine's earlier, 1993-95 sculpture maintains a distance between the viewer and the observed, whereas the Starns introduce added utility to their vitrines by simultaneously displaying *and* turning them into furniture for eating and drinking. By replicating a café, they connect the past with the present, making history relevant to the current situation. Both *Rampart's Café* and *Dinner of the Dictators* span time, share the food theme and international investigation of civilization, implying the destructive effects of the subjects at hand. An important difference lay in the Starns' focus on religion, whereas Paine singled out political figures. Doug and Mike, in their room-size installation, also presented their research in the form of writings and illuminated texts.

Multi-layered meaning permeates *Rampart's Café*. The brothers' association of their own musings with the central texts of world religions is a daring feat. Easily misconstrued as blasphemy in a city over-sensitized to religion, the very personal nature of the Starn inquiry spurs tolerance by engaging in concepts of creative thought, reflection, and writing. The installation exudes the immediacy of study coupled with the inherent human desire to pursue knowledge and enlightenment. The exhibition reveals a vital interest in world religions and global interconnectedness, expressed by the artists in their own words: "The texts are transparent so you can see the history all at once, and the paper of the photographs is taken away leaving the thoughts, the events, the memories."⁹² Because of the museum's geographic location, the message here turns into a political statement communicating reconciliation and dialogue. The Jewish Museum in New York invited the artists to present a reincarnation of *Rampart's Café* in a 2001 group exhibition. The show opened to the public on September 9, just two days before 9/11 (see chapter 4.2 The Starns and 9/11).

Premier photography journal *Aperture* devoted its December 1997 issue *On*

⁹¹ Volk, Gregory. "Roxy Paine: Dreams and Mathematics." In: Roxy Paine, *Second Nature* (Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston and Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, 2002). 28-29.

⁹² Stoll, "Doug and Mike Starn." 22.

Location to studio visits, featuring icons like documentary photographer Mary Ellen Mark and Duane Michals. Doug and Mike Starn are the only photographers in the issue who have transcended the medium by exploring new materials and exhibition methods. Although this aspect is absent from Diana Stoll's portrayal of *Rampart's Café*, the editorial summarizes: "[...] Offering a nonlinear take on time and space, where mutability is the only constant, are Doug and Mike Starn. [...] These identical twins fuse art, science, and the spiritual, while layering images, text [...] in consideration of the ephemeral nature of art itself."⁹³ While photography continues to be the leading medium for the Starns, the *Rampart's Café* installation clearly marks an artistic leap and undaunted advance into installation art, precipitating their foray into public art.

3.3 *Behind Your Eye, Neuberger Museum of Art*

The *Behind Your Eye* installation was organized by Dede Young, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Neuberger Museum on the campus of State University of New York in Purchase. The work shown from March 7 to August 8, 2004 spanned the years from 1996 to 2004, including photography, artist books (Ill. 37), video projections (Ill. 39) and two monumental 10-by-55-foot Japanese-style sliding screens (Ill. 38). The exhibition is poignantly characterized by Young as "a metaphor for the artists' primary concern: light, its gravitational pull, and the universal attraction to it."⁹⁴ In the words of Doug and Mike Starn,

Light is power, light is knowledge, it is what we want, it is what we need, it is satisfaction, fulfillment, truth, and purity. It is history, the future, and spirituality. Light is what we fear and hate. Light is what controls every decision and action we take. Light is thought. Light has gravity, light is what attracts us. Light implies–necessitates darkness, the shadows created by anything physical.⁹⁵

Within this framework, the theme coalesces the artists' many interests in Western and Eastern philosophy and culture, as well as science coming to life in images of trees, leaves, nocturnal insects, and man. With their roots in photography, Doug and

⁹³ Editorial. In: *Aperture* Issue 146 (Winter 1997): n.p.

⁹⁴ Starn, *Behind Your Eye*. 1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

Mike's preoccupation with light forms a natural transfer and connection of technical know-how with the conceptual. While Declerck's introduction of the *Absorption of Light* portfolio refers to light as illuminating metaphor,⁹⁶ reaffirmed in the catalogue accompanying the Neuberger exhibition, the evolution of artistic inquiry evolved further. Around 2005, in connection with a residency at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, a new interpretation of the color black as a result of the complete absorption of light emerges.

Perhaps the biggest innovation of the *Behind Your Eye* exhibition was the reinterpretation of *Structure of Thought 7* (Ill. 26) in the form of two enormous Japanese Shoji-style screens spanning the entire width of one of the two galleries occupied by the exhibition (Ill. 38). The new, large-scale transparent ink jet prints enabled the artists to pull their large-format works off the wall. In hindsight, this installation appears like a full-size model for South Ferry Subway Station, anticipating the transparency of the glass tile wall with its layered tree branches (Ill. 75). At the Neuberger Museum, the pair of 55-foot-long sliding screens formed an over 10-foot-wide passageway, 10 feet high toward the gallery entrance, with a lower partition facing the gallery space. The taller track featured graphically strong, black tree branches in profile, while the front row silhouetted half a dozen individual, mature deciduous trees in their dormant state. Printed on varnished, transparent paper, the difference in scale and long view versus close-up perspective evoke the dual impression of looking at trees *and* hovering in their crowns.

The two sets of parallel screens framed the entrance to the exhibition, a portal the viewer passed through to enter the gallery. Two medium-size prints of discarded *Black Pulse* leafs (Ill. 37) bracketed the sliding screens on each side. These four works introduce new photographic subject matter, investigating the absorption of light by the leaf to create energy through photosynthesis. Doug and Mike Starn poetically state their thoughts on the leaf:

⁹⁶ Declerck, "Absorption of Light." .n.p.

The leaf uses light to pull black out of the air, the black that I expelled from my lungs, my carbon dioxide. Through its capillaries and into its veins it pushes back, streams black, pulses black, the black that was in my veins and is the light that controls me. These are the burned out, desiccated; discarded hearts and lungs of trees, only the veins remain. Curled up and brittle after the long summer hours. Dropped from the branches and drifting to the ground—lifted by the wind and scattered.⁹⁷

These transcendental thoughts on nature, a logical extension on the subject of trees, establish their timeless view of the world. This attitude reaches beyond the inner emigration and withdrawal from the political moment, but looks at cultural production from a metaphorical point of view. As such, their voice clearly inspires reflection and allows an open reading to anyone in his individual search for enlightenment. Through digital enhancement, the process of decay has been further enhanced and made visible, alluding to death of nature—and man as the remains are scattered by the wind. This one interpretation, of course, is complemented by the focus on the concept of arterial transportation, thus rephrasing the meaning within the context of a public transportation system later, allowing it to be site-specific in an entirely different context. Both interpretations are connected to the site and the viewer. Beauty and meaning indeed are entirely in the eye of the beholder, enthusiastically described by Benjamin Genocchio. He is the only critic who pinpointed the novelty of the digitally enhanced process along with the introduction of color in the *Black Pulse* photographs:

Equally bewitching are four photographs of leaf skeletons made from scans of real leaves that have been digitally enhanced, blown up, then printed a lovely rich gold color on strips of glossy white paper. Their dazzling color hypnotizes, while the digital addition of shadows makes the leaves seem to float on the surface of the paper. I love these photographs, even though I know they are not entirely real.⁹⁸

Questioning reality and visual truth is indeed an ongoing discussion in contemporary media, because digital processes increasingly make reality hover on the verge of the virtual. Moving into the arena of Photoshop and digital-effects photographers, the Starn brothers continue to investigate the cutting edge of

⁹⁷ Starn, *Behind Your Eye*. 2

⁹⁸ Benjamin Genocchio, "Bewitching Visions That Are Larger Than Life," *New York Times*, Apr. 4, 2004. L7.

cultural production, completing the loop to their early, postmodern appropriations of images from the history of art.

The Neuberger Museum art installation was reminiscent of a reading room with rows of simple tables, outfitted with chairs and white gloves for handling the exhibits: 58 box frames contained pinned photographs of nocturnal moths featured in Doug and Mike's monograph *Attracted to Light*, published the previous year. Pinned inside the frames, the delicate subjects were reminiscent of entomological displays and formed the core of the exhibition along with three monumental, wall-mounted *ATL film stills* of a moth fluttering towards the light, each one a laminated, Lambda digital C-print mounted on aluminum. Lilly Wei pointed out the didactic character of the twin's philosophical musings:

The subjects here are light as physical entity and as metaphor for perception and knowledge, and the Starn brothers have made an epic art-and-science project out of it—a visually lyrical seminar that attempts to demonstrate the interconnectedness of everything. [...] It all adds up to a signature Starn production—an extravagant, state-of-the-art, postlapsarian meditation on science, transcendence and transience.⁹⁹

These works are rooted in the artists' early, black-and-white style and as Edward Leffingwell put it, "the photographs have the look and feel of things historic—characteristic of the Starns' production."¹⁰⁰

The second gallery housed the video projection *Nowhere to Fall* on a 25-foot-long scrim and two illuminated artist books. One of the two books, *Behind My Eye*, obviously led to the exhibition title *Behind Your Eye*. This 1998 bound book of drawings on transparent Mylar is literally illuminated from within by copper and electro-luminescent wiring, a contemporary reinterpretation of the medieval illuminated manuscript tradition. The exhibition checklist describes the two-channel video projection as a monologue by actor Dennis Hopper, who read texts compiled by the Starns from Dante's *Paradiso* and cosmonauts' reflections on weightlessness.¹⁰¹ On the second channel to Hopper's left, sequences of fluttering

⁹⁹ Lilly Wei, "Doug and Mike Starn," *ARTnews* Vol. 103 (Summer 2004). 168.

¹⁰⁰ Leffingwell, "Fields of Light." 50.

¹⁰¹ Starn, *Behind Your Eye*. n.p.

moths, neurons of the brain and a Daedalus-inspired, floating human once again evoke the eternal search for light.

The exhibition catalog, published in the form of a folded poster, features a photograph of the entire installation (Ill. 37). In it, the stepped height of the *Structure of Thought 7* installation forms a backdrop reminiscent of a photographer's set design. Shot with a wide-angle lens, then collaged in a panoramic, 360-degree view of the gallery space, the angular shapes of the tables crisscross the floor akin to the tree branches in the background.

Reviews published in ARTnews¹⁰² and the New York Times¹⁰³ were both illustrated with the screen installation, while *Art in America* trumped with the collaged, panoramic photo of the exhibition on its two-page spread (Ill. 37).¹⁰⁴ These entirely positive reviews by three leading New York critics reintroduced Doug and Mike Starn to one of their most important audiences after a six-year exhibition hiatus in the City. The accompanying installation photos gave a convincing impression of their move towards installation work, even for those who would be unable to travel upstate to Purchase.

3.4 Gravity of Light, Färgfabriken Kunsthalle and U.S. Venues

With *Gravity of Light* (Ill. 40-47) the Starns introduce a radical, new exhibition technique: rather than relying on well-appointed, traditional gallery lighting, they built their own carbon arc lamp to illuminate the space. The duo continues its preoccupation with light, both in philosophical and technical terms: "In Gravity of Light, the Starns' lamp, like the sun, provides a gravitational center to their universe. They choose the language of photography, writing in light. Their cameras are tools to mediate between senses and sensed, to introduce light into darkness. Light, therefore, is the medium and the message."¹⁰⁵ Beginning in 2004, the

¹⁰² Wei, "Doug and Mike Starn." 168.

¹⁰³ Ken Johnson, "Seeing the Cosmos in Its Moths and Trees," *New York Times*, June 18, 2004. E30.

¹⁰⁴ Leffingwell, "Fields of Light." 50-51.

¹⁰⁵ Exhibition 'Gravity of Light', Starn Studio, <http://www.starnstudio.com> (Apr. 30, 2012).

installation has been realized at three diverse venues in partnership with cultural institutions in Europe and the United States:

- Färgfabriken Kunsthalle, Stockholm, Sweden, Nov. 13, 2004 – Jan. 2005
- Pipe Building, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Oct. 9-30, 2008
- Holy Cross Church, Cincinnati, Ohio, Oct. 6 – Dec. 30, 2012

Färgfabriken Kunsthalle, Stockholm, Sweden, Nov. 13, 2004 – Jan. 2005

First presented at Färgfabriken Kunsthalle in Stockholm, Sweden from November 13, 2004 through January 2005, the installation was voted among “Best of 2004” by Artforum magazine and described by Tom Vanderbilt: “The Starn brothers place a sun at the center of their own artistic universe: A looming carbon-arc lamp, sizzling and snapping, some relic of Victorian science, searingly illuminates a room ringed with works exploring the meanings of light and darkness.”¹⁰⁶ With this new presentation mode Doug and Mike further explore the concepts and meaning of sun and light, now embodied not only by the subject matter of the *Absorption of Light* photographic print series, but also by controlling light through their own device (Ill. 40-42). Technology thus becomes their means to establish an entire environment, whereas *Ramparts Café* consisted of objects illuminated from within (Ill. 18-20). Further, *Behind Your Eye* at the Neuberger Museum of Art still relied on gallery lighting, as well (Ill. 37).

Because the single source of light at the center of the installation emits 50,000 watts of electric light, too harsh for the human eye, special glasses need to be worn to prevent permanent damage. In researching the phenomenon of light and enlightenment, the artists unearthed the electrical experiments by scientist Humphry Davy and conceptually linked them to Leonardo da Vinci’s *John the Baptist* (1513/16, oil on panel, 27 x 22 ½ inches), which they photographed on their visit to the Musée du Louvre. The Starns describe their experiment (Ill. 42) bestowed upon the viewer:

¹⁰⁶ Tom Vanderbilt, “Best of 2004: Mike and Doug Starn, “Gravity of Light,” *Artforum International* (Dec. 2004). 171.

Part sculpture, part scientific experiment, the peculiar thirteen-foot-tall mechanical structure at its center is titled *Leonardo's St. John* or *This is my Middle Finger* (2005) [ibid.]. In the painting by da Vinci (himself an artist-inventor and maker of meaning), John the Baptist points his finger to the heavens, indicating the path to enlightenment. In the Starns' carbon arc lamp—an adaptation of an 1804 model by British physicist Humphry Davy—electrifies that light with carbon-rod “fingers” that conduct a current between their respective nodes, producing a brilliant point of light too dazzling for the naked eye.¹⁰⁷

The bright sparks of the lamp reflected from the stark white walls of the voluminous Färgfabriken Kunsthalle, thereby lending an ambience that hovered between pulsating disco scene and science laboratory. *Gravity of Light* concludes the Starns' trajectory towards fully realized, multi-disciplinary, interactive installation by combining the concept of a space as exhibition hall with that of a stage, where visitors must interact with their surroundings. This methodology actually moves the brothers' work away from traditional fine art and closer to the work of avant-garde visionaries like Robert Wilson, who successfully married art, exhibition and stage design to fully engage audiences.¹⁰⁸

Gravity of Light was featured in the local newspapers, the *Svenska Dagbladet*¹⁰⁹, *Stockholm City Nöje*¹¹⁰, and the Swedish art magazine *Konstvärlden & Disajn*¹¹¹, as well as *Dagens Industri*.¹¹² The “Best of 2004” accolade by Artforum¹¹³ provided international visibility and recognition for *Gravity of Light*, which headlined again in Pittsburgh a few years later.

Pipe Building, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Oct. 9-30, 2008

In October 2008, Pittsburgh celebrated the International Festival of Firsts, a citywide, performing and visual arts festival organized at the occasion of the city's 250th anniversary of its founding. Produced by the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust in

¹⁰⁷ Mike + Doug Starn. “Gravity of Light”, <http://starnstudio.com> (Nov. 26, 2012).

¹⁰⁸ In works like *Death Destruction & Detroit I and II*, staged at Schaubühne Berlin in 1978 and 1987, scenes of Robert Wilson's four-and-a-half-hour production engaged audiences in a 360-degree radius, and from above.

¹⁰⁹ Lysande Tvillingar, “Med ljuset som livskraft,” *Svenska Dagbladet* Nov. 11, 2004. 6-7.

¹¹⁰ Henrik Tiselius, “Bröderna Starn fyller Färgfabriken med ljus,” *Stockholm City Nöje* Nov. 12, 2004. 4.

¹¹¹ Catarina Astrom, “Ljus & Sönderfall,” *Konstvärlden & Disajn* (Nov. 2004). 70-77.

¹¹² Lars Tulin, “Starn Twins lovar lysande utställning,” *Dagens Industri* Oct. 22-23, 2004. Sec. 2.

¹¹³ Vanderbilt, “Best of 2004: Mike and Doug Starn, “Gravity of Light.” 171.

association with the Andy Warhol Museum, the celebration featured exclusive U.S. premieres by acclaimed international artists. The Starns were invited by the Trust to bring *Gravity of Light* to the Trust's Wood Street Galleries satellite, the Pipe Building, an abandoned factory warehouse located at 3000 Liberty Avenue (Ill. 43-45). Wood Street Galleries had first hosted the Starns' *Absorption + Transmission* leaf and tree cycles on the absorbing effects of light in 2006. The festival offered an opportunity to debut *Gravity of Light* in the States. Mary Thomas duly compared the two iterations: "The components are the same, but the difference between venues illustrates the importance of place to an installation's ultimate effect."¹¹⁴

The site received much attention, particularly the building's gritty industrial history with its location at the underbelly of the city in the Strip District, a narrow band of land along the Allegheny River, which was favored in bygone days as a commercial center because of access to water transportation. After decades of deterioration, the area is being rediscovered, while an air of discomfort lingers: "The venue, however, seems more "brownfield" than "high art" – even my directions ("Right next to [shuttered gentleman's club] Bare Elegance – park in the alley") were more mid-'90s rave party than MoMA."¹¹⁵ To reestablish significance of place for the Strip by bringing visitors to this forgotten neighborhood, indeed appears to be one of the organizer's goals for the Starn installation.

The Pipe Building's decrepit environs were only minimally prepared for the installation. Primarily, its glass block windows were painted black to block out daylight. Embracing the status quo of the site became part of the interpretive scheme. Thomas muses: "My first impression of 'Gravity' was 'distressed' – not as in anxiety but indicating wear and passing: The bare trees to winter, the leaves to dust, the workplace to abandonment."¹¹⁶ The cyclical nature of existence continuously permeates the Starns' work. This central creative denominator tends to subordinate the pristine to a hands-on, no-nonsense treatment of the art object

¹¹⁴ Mary Thomas, "Blinding Light Reveals Interesting Visions," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Oct. 22, 2008. C-1.

¹¹⁵ Justin Hopper, "Venue Vetting: The Pipe Building," in *Pittsburgh International Festival of Firsts* (<http://pifof.wordpress.com/2008/10/07/venue-vetting-the-pipe-building/>, Oct. 7, 2008). <http://pifof.wordpress.com/2008/10/07/venue-vetting-the-pipe-building> (Apr. 21, 2012).

¹¹⁶ Thomas, "Blinding Light Reveals Interesting Visions." C-1.

itself. Coercing new insights takes precedent over delivering accepted aesthetic norms, while perfection is subjugated to the practical or, here, the given architectural setting: “[...] discovery is aided by the breathtakingly beautiful – if almost sacrificial – installation of the museum-quality images, which have been worked around architectural elements – cut, pierced, bent.”¹¹⁷ Printed on Gampi or Thai mulberry paper, the fragile quality of the seven monumental, composite prints from the *Absorption of Light* portfolio emphasized the stark contrast with their rugged handling in a raw space, particularly the pristine *Black Pulse Lambda* print (Ill. 45).

The blinding flashes of the Starns’ carbon arc lamp in the Pipe Building’s shadows set up a counterpoint to a related installation by Chicago-based, Austrian artist Kurt Hentschläger at Wood Street Galleries: *Zee* was an immersive audiovisual environment, which consisted of dense fog lit by strobe and pulse lights layered with a tormenting soundscape.¹¹⁸ Visitors traversed the gallery with the aid of a waist-level rope—the only means of orientation. Kenneth Baker denoted the two shows as “Art That Causes Pain,”¹¹⁹ and, like Thomas, described the heightened awareness gleaned from the experience: “The reward for this ordeal became apparent only when I returned to street level and daylight: Suddenly, everything took on an astonishing clarity and definition.”¹²⁰ Challenging viewers’ perceptions followed the festival objective to bring new art genres to this rust belt city. The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust’s decision to establish a curatorial context between the two spaces underlined the agenda of innovation, while creating additional impetus to see both installations.

For the Starns, preparations for the Pipe Building installation coincided with their search for a studio space to realize *Big Bambú*, their largest, fully three-dimensional, interactive outdoor art environment to date. While planning the Pittsburgh project, they were able to compare and contrast large-scale industrial

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ See description and photo documentation at www.kurthentschlagel.com/portfolio/zee/zee.html (May 1, 2012).

¹¹⁹ Kenneth Baker, “Art that Causes Pain,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 23, 2008. N40.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

spaces. The Pipe Building's 10,000 square-foot size appears small in comparison to the Starns' new 50,000 square-foot studio in Beacon, New York, which they began renting in September 2008, a month before the *Gravity of Light* opening. In Beacon *Big Bambú* (Ill. 98) was created for the first time by year-end.

Holy Cross Church, Cincinnati, Ohio, Oct. 6 – Dec. 30, 2012

Working in partnership with the Cincinnati Art Museum, Doug and Mike installed *Gravity of Light* (Ill. 46-47) at Holy Cross Church in fall 2012. Second partner was FOTOFOCUS Cincinnati, a photography festival with over 500 artists at more than 60 exhibition venues. James Crump, chief curator of the Cincinnati Art Museum, co-chaired the October 2012 biennial.

The church building is part of the Mount Adams Monastery at 1055 St. Paul Place, which has been closed for some time. Similar to Pittsburgh, Cincinnati is a post-industrial city, somewhat removed from the cultural capitals of the Northeast and Midwest, New York and Chicago, where dormant buildings, entire districts yet, lie in wait for reawakening and adaptive new uses following years of disinvestment. Artistic uses often are an intermediary stage preceding redevelopment, calling attention to sites and neighborhoods.

In this third iteration, *Gravity of Light* received less attention than the previous installations. Notable is the Starns' publication of the *Gravity of Light* monograph, which bears the series title.¹²¹ James Crump, who brought the brothers to Cincinnati, contributed the introductory essay. In it, he fittingly reaffirms the Starns' predilection for scale and links *Gravity of Light* to *Big Bambú*, augmented by a historic perspective regarding their exploration of science: "Scale and, through juxtaposition, the relationship between the microcosm of humanity and the cosmos were also principal features of the Renaissance-era cabinets of curiosity, whose function it was to reveal the veiled networks between *naturalia* (nature or that

¹²¹ The difficulty of publishing a catalogue in conjunction with a temporary installation lies in the fact that the time-based work does not exist at printing deadline. This obstacle dissipated, because previous documentation provided the framework.

created by God) and *artificialia* (the man-made).¹²² Those Cabinets of Wonder, of course, were the precursors to museums. Consequently, the identity of the Starns in their role as artists, bridge the perceived gap between art and science. What could be discarded as pseudoscience can also be credited as a both transcendental and scientific exploration on the art of seeing. Crump summarizes:

Gravity of Light in its totality represents a remarkable achievement in installation art, and helps reconcile many of the Starns' varied and sometimes seemingly disparate interests and curiosities, between photography and the art of painting and sculpture; between Western and Eastern modes of thinking; and between aesthetics and the technical fields of optics and physics.¹²³

Robert Rosenblum has touted the preoccupation with nature as Neo-Romanticism, focusing on the artistic intent rather than stylistic commonalities or the historic trajectory.¹²⁴ I consider this approach as too broad, because it would lead to the logical conclusion that the entire history of art could be classified as Romanticism. To evince cross-disciplinary connectivity lies at the core of the Starns' art, most poignantly expressed in the complex, multilayered installations and public art. In this endeavor they rely on and are aided by the digital age with its tools, services and budgets. Consequently, I argue for a classification that considers artistic creation within the context of time and place.

3.5 From Installation to Public Art

As outlined in chapter 3.1, the Starns' entered installation art via photography; in the next phase of artistic development, their experience with space through their installations became the preamble for public art. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Starns sharpened their understanding of space and sense of place with monumental installations that investigated light, leading to the transformative *Behind Your Eye* project at the Neuberger Museum of Art in 2004. This exhibition for the first time introduced American and New York audiences to the *Absorption of*

¹²² James Crump, "Deeds & Sufferings of Light and Darkness." In: Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*. 10.

¹²³ Ibid. 15.

¹²⁴ Starn, *Gravity of Light*. 74-84. This essay needs to be considered within the urgency of the late 20th century to name and proclaim new artistic phenomena (compare chapter 2.2).

Light portfolio in an installation context. The duo's place-based, multi-disciplinary approach, helped garner their first public art commission for the MTA's South Ferry Station.

The brothers introduced the practice of restaging installations at different venues with *Ramparts Café* in response to follow-up exhibition invitations. Repeat installations present the artist with the challenge to stay fresh in approach and outcome. One way to do that is to adapt a work to the specific environment it is being recreated in, so that visitor experience, documentation and potential for the artist to further grow and evolve are not eradicated. As to *Gravity of Light*, Färgfabriken's clean white environment completely differed from the raw, unfinished space of the Pipe Building in Pittsburgh, while both buildings hailed as postindustrial vestiges. Cincinnati's Holy Cross Church, inhabited another, previously unfamiliar building type to the pair, albeit closely related to their interest in religion.

The vastly different architectures not only offer the Starns' installations new frameworks, but they also continue to challenge their abilities as photographers in the documentation of these sites. In turn, the photographic record calls attention to these buildings, while redefining and reinventing them as places, where art can be viewed. Further, these high profile exhibitions call attention to the neighborhoods they are situated in, as well as their special circumstances. Indeed, the majority of literature published on the Starn installations does include information on the type, nature, or history of each venue. Thus, art enters into the service of leading audiences to places they otherwise would hardly be exposed to. The partnerships established to realize these projects often serve a larger agenda or a broader goal, which may not be immediately evident in the art-related coverage.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Researching issues related to the individual structures or the larger, urban design context exceeds the framework of this study, but offers additional opportunities for inquiry.

4. The Catalyst: 9/11

In early 2001, Doug and Mike Starn were immersed in their studio practice. Works of the *Absorption of Light* portfolio were produced for solo exhibitions at the Weinstein Gallery in Minneapolis and at the Stephen Wirtz Gallery in San Francisco. They also installed *Ramparts Café* at its second venue, the Jewish Museum of New York for its September 9 opening. Then, tragedy struck:

On September 11, 2001, nineteen al Qaeda terrorists hijacked four commercial U.S. jetliners, deliberately crashing two of the planes into the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center and a third plane into the Pentagon. After learning of the other attacks, passengers and crew members on the fourth plane attempted to commandeer control, and the plane was crashed into an empty field in Western Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people were killed on that day, the single largest loss of life from a foreign attack on American soil.¹²⁶

All New Yorkers, including Doug and Mike Starn, were immediately and directly affected. In this chapter, I will address the following questions: What are 9/11's broader, cultural consequences or, its effects on individual artists like the Starns and other leading New York artists? How did 9/11 affect *Ramparts Café*, whose political overtones indicate the duo's concern for dialogue between the world religions (outlined in chapter 3.2)?

Notable in the framework of 9/11 are the ensuing preoccupation with public space and the many initiatives to memorialize, warranting an investigation of key public art projects in direct response to the tragedy, both temporary and permanent. Like most urban cores, Manhattan's residential community is predominantly comprised of single apartments, whose inhabitants meet and seek company in the city's public places. Schlögel pointedly speaks of a paralysis that ensued in the aftermath of the tragedy, which heightened the pressure on public space as the site of an emergency.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ "9/11 Memorial," The National September 11 Memorial & Museum, www.911memorial.org. (Aug. 8, 2011).

¹²⁷ Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit*. 32.

A sensitized public, among them many who had lost a family member, friend or an acquaintance, also responded by turning to art, and particularly art in or for the public. Eric Fischl's public exhibition of *Tumbling Woman* (Ill. 53) just one year after 9/11 sparked controversy, while the light installation *Tribute in Light* by James LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda (Ill. 54) became an annual event for a decade, succeeded by the dedication of the permanent *National September 11 Memorial* (Ill. 55-56) at the World Trade Center site in 2011. Doug and Mike Starn's first public art commission at South Ferry Station was launched during the rebuilding of New York's infrastructure with the aid of federal transportation funding. Thus, while 9/11 caused great destruction, it also became a catalyst for major art initiatives.

4.1 Post-9/11 Desperation and Remembrance in New York

The date September 9, 2001, is indelibly imprinted in world history, because the destruction of New York's World Trade Center and the loss of close to 3,000 lives provoked far-reaching consequences not only locally, but also nationally and internationally. Ten years later, the evolution of the 9/11 discourse among historians is moving toward a stance that the impact has been overestimated. I disagree with the assessment by Matthias Lorenz, who states that the term 9/11 has become a placeholder that dominates the political discourse of our times without the benefit of a clearly delineated content.¹²⁸ If anything, September 11 may be considered a trigger whose significance cannot be underestimated, continuously affecting global events. A clear definition of 9/11 is impossible, because it did permeate all walks of life for the period following the incident when it dominated the news.

Following 9/11, the question of an adequate response to loss or extreme events in public space has been exhaustively addressed. Schlögel notes that, while the Islamic extremists' anti-western, anti-capitalistic symbolism of the attack is evident, a new, heightened awareness regarding the actual location's complex

¹²⁸ Matthias Lorenz. "Nach den Bildern-9/11 als 'Kultur-Schock'." In: Lorenz, *Narrative des Entsetzens*. 7.

reality could be observed. This awareness necessitates the direct interaction with a place, demands Schlögel.¹²⁹ He further argues successfully that 9/11 threatens the basic democratic principle of open access to public space.¹³⁰ In Manhattan, the urge for individual interaction with the urban environment following the tragedy was great, expressed in countless temporary memorials.¹³¹ Schlögel and Danto both recognize the importance of a public realm that is accessible for free and unrestricted use, with Danto particularly noting the need for artistic expression and public art.

Following 9/11, grief unified New York but also prompted a critical reflection of the need to memorialize. Noteworthy is the monograph *Memorial Mania* by American studies scholar Erica Doss, who poignantly observes that “the material culture of grief [...] embodies the faith that Americans place in *things* to negotiate complex moments and events, such as traumatic death.”¹³² Associating physical manifestations with mourning extends popular religious practices to place mementos at altars, burials, or gravesites. Coupled with growing percent-for-art programs beginning in the 1980s and an urge to improve a plethora of newly constructed or failing civic spaces, memorials have become a prominent outlet and cause for funding drives:

Memorial mania is shaped by individual impulses and factional grievances, by special interest claims for esteem and recognition, and by efforts to symbolize and enshrine the particular issues and aspirations of diverse and often stratified publics. Today, the pace of commemoration has quickened, and the number of memorials has escalated, because growing numbers of Americans view *public art* as a particularly powerful vehicle of visibility and authority.¹³³

In the case of the World Trade Center site, a plethora of ideas and concepts quickly circulated, including the proposal to dedicate the entire site to the victims.¹³⁴ In

¹²⁹ Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume Lesen wir die Zeit* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2011). 31-32.

¹³⁰ Ibid. 23.

¹³¹ Arthur Danto, "The Art of 9/11," *The Nation* (Sept. 5, 2002), <http://www.thenation.com/article/art-911> (Oct. 6, 2013).

¹³² Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*. 71.

¹³³ Ibid. 37.

¹³⁴ Paul Goldberger, "Groundwork : How the Future of Ground Zero Is Being Resolved " *New Yorker* Vol. 78, No. 12 (May 20, 2002). 88.

Oklahoma City, the federal administration set this precedent following the 1995 terrorist bombing. Doss decries the public's reaction: "Never was there any doubt that there would be a permanent memorial at what was quickly dubbed 'Hallowed Ground Zero,' an assumption that tells us how prevalent, and how sacrosanct, issues of memory and acts of commemoration have become in America today."¹³⁵ Memorialization and memory are at the center of Assmann's research, whose anthropological point of departure is rooted in the memory or cult of the dead.¹³⁶ She introduces the term "functional memory" to convey, for instance, the interest of the ruling to set monuments to cement their own remembrance: functional memory collects and stores information and events.¹³⁷ As a complement, "repository memory" competes as a collective memory, including tradition, perhaps expressed as oral history. Following 9/11, functional memory evolved as a simple mechanism of recording events, which Assmann would have considered an imbalance of the two strands.¹³⁸ Since the expectations of functional memory have been and continue to be fed by the cycle of self-propelled interests and funding mechanisms in public art, recording takes precedent. On the other hand, cultural production is and should be a reflection of society. American culture can be characterized as generous and loyal while also being transient and ever-changing, making a permanent landmark that the public can return to highly desirable. With individualism as a core value, the commemoration of single persons or incidents finds its highest expression in collective recognition, leading to competitive recognition of inclusive representation in this multi-ethnic, multifaceted society.

¹³⁵ Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*. 6.

¹³⁶ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*. 23 ff.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 128-129.

¹³⁸ Ibid. 130-132, particularly 132.

4.2 The Starns and 9/11

World Religions in Crisis: *Ramparts Café* at the Jewish Museum in New York City, Sept. 9, 2001–Feb. 10, 2002

On the Starn exhibition schedule in September 2011 was *Ramparts Café*, which opened at New York's Jewish Museum two days before September 11.¹³⁹ The first *Ramparts Café* was installed at the Jerusalem's Tower of David Museum in 1995.¹⁴⁰ The Starn investigation of the world religions was now confronted with a global rift between faiths. The consequences were felt immediately. Located on 5th Avenue just a few blocks north of the Metropolitan Museum, the Jewish Museum, in unison with all of Manhattan, dealt with the 9/11 aftermath. The Jewish Museum had initially planned to host a public discussion with the Starns. In the wake of September 11 all plans for public programs were abandoned due to the great damage and ensuing anxiety regarding additional terrorist strikes.¹⁴¹ Consequently, the Starn exhibition passed quietly, without reviews or further notice. The confusion caused by present events overshadowed and delayed the proposition for an interdenominational dialog.

Following 9/11 Doug and Mike withdrew from the domain of interfaith investigation to focus on their studio work, namely the *Absorption of Light* portfolio, comprised of the cycles *Black Pulse*, *Attracted to Light*, *Structure of Thought* and *Toshodaiji*. Of note is the observation that the Starns immersed themselves in the study of Western religion and Buddhism, namely in the *Toshodaiji* series, but have not broached Islam or exhibited within its cultural realm. They alone and the cultural venues that approach them with project proposals define the course of the artistic investigation. In considering the entire oeuvre, Doug and Mike's creative inquiry typically concentrates on a universal consideration of the human condition and existential questions. Not being

¹³⁹ "Doug and Mike Starn: Ramparts Café," The Jewish Museum,

<http://www.thejewishmuseum.org/exhibitions/dougandmikestarn> (Apr. 8, 2012).

¹⁴⁰ The Jerusalem installation is examined in chapters 2.3 Photography as Leading Medium and 3.2 Ramparts Café, Tower of David Museum.

¹⁴¹ Starn, "Interview by Christina Lanzl." Nov. 21, 2011.

absorbed by any specific political agenda gives them greater freedom to pursue their own interests.

The Fallen Series, 2011

If 9/11 revealed the impossibility for dialogue related to the *Ramparts Café* installation, the gusts of destruction immediately delivered new material for reflection to the Starns' doorstep. As New York artists with a studio in the Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn, Doug and Mike experienced September 11 directly. Mike remembers:

I was on my way to work at 9:45am, crossing the Brooklyn Bridge towards Brooklyn when I felt a tremor, which startled me. By the time I reached the studio, the second plane had hit and smoke was billowing across the East River. By then, everyone knew what had happened, because they had tuned into radio or TV.¹⁴²

As the tragedy unfolded for the several thousand people trapped inside the towers the wind carried smoke and with it scores of paper from the exposed workplaces across the East River. Some of the sheets came to rest around the Starn Studio, where the artists collected them.

Deeply affected and moved by the presence of these mementos of death and destruction, they coped with the unspeakable by turning to art. The brothers turned random, smoldered and frayed pieces from office inventories into quiet commentaries they titled *Fallen* (Ill. 49-52). A single, desiccated leaf missing one half is superimposed on *Fallen 1* and *Fallen 2*. In their advanced state of decay the leaf parallels the physical condition of the paper, while also hinting at the advancing autumn and the approaching winter, signaling ending life cycles. The paper each leaf is exposed to consists of a page of meeting notes and a standard, preprinted inventory-control form.

The symbolism of the leaf imagery from the brothers' ongoing *Black Pulse* series implies the energy that is carried in the exposed veins. In *Fallen*, the veins have been severed in many places, the way September 11 impacted countless lives and

¹⁴² Mike *ibid.* Nov. 21, 2011.

the existing world order. On *Fallen 3* (Ill. 51), a hand reaches a charred business card from a member of the firm Cantor Fitzgerald & Co. toward the center of a blank stock order form by the same firm. Absence is made visible with the urgent question: is the person on the card a survivor? The viewer reads the individual's last name, 'Cloud', and realizes the Starns' despondent comment on the drifting clouds of ashes that also carried the remains of victims. The *Fallen* works are private mementos by the Starns as they are struggling to comprehend the unspeakable. The simple, delicate interventions on a few random, found remains of the World Trade Center represent a hesitating poetry. Like many fellow artists, Mike and Doug were trying to come to terms with September 11 through creative inquiry.¹⁴³ The *Fallen Series* stands isolated within Doug and Mike's overall oeuvre and has not been exhibited, pointing to the intimate nature of these works.

4.3 Artistic Production after 9/11

"How can you think of making art at a time like this?"¹⁴⁴ ARTnews contributing editor Barbara Pollack asked prominent New York artists including several with significant records of works in public spaces, immediately following the disaster. To any committed artist, such an inquiry appears to question the *raison d'être*. Simultaneously, the therapeutic effects of the arts, particularly in dealing with trauma, have long been recognized. Pollack's question is a rhetorical one of course, meant to measure the city's pulse. The public nature of 9/11 required an open dialogue that included the artist's voice.

Jenny Holzer grappled with the political ramifications: "I have been thinking more about this tragedy on the flesh, rather than on the art. Art is a means of knowing and warning, and I fear that this slow, profound art process and much else that is good will be pushed aside for cheap, dishonest vengeance, which will only yield more killing." Similarly, sculptor Richard Serra, with a studio close to the World Trade Center, pragmatically responded: "I'd much rather know what our

¹⁴³ Similar artistic tributes that represent a departure from the artists' oeuvre were created by Audrey Flack and Robert Zakanitch (see 4.3), as well as Eric Fischl (see 4.4).

¹⁴⁴ Barbara Pollack, "How can you think about making art at a time like this?," *ARTnews* 100, issue 10 (Nov. 2001). 148.

government is going to do next than speculate on the changing art scene.” Mierle Ladermann Ukeles was particularly affected in her work at Staten Island’s Fresh Kills landfill, where she was working on a public art project following its projected closure in 2001 as part of a Percent for Art commission by the Department of Cultural Affairs in 1989.¹⁴⁵ With the designation of Fresh Kills Landfill as repository for 9/11 debris including human remains, working towards a meaningful recreational and cultural destination magnified beyond measure at a place, where the World Trade Center towers “once appeared to be marching right toward you [...]. I’ve been thinking about this place for so many years—how to heal it, how to bring it back to life. What should become of this place now? What is appropriate?”¹⁴⁶

Works in all cultural genres were affected by or created in direct association with 9/11, while other artists fled into inner emigration or consciously turned away from the events. In his essay *The Art of 9/11* Arthur Danto describes the reaction of a number of artists like Audrey Flack, “who felt the despair of impotence [...], and went out to Montauk to paint the sunlight on fishing boats. Audrey does monumental sculptures.”¹⁴⁷ Robert Zakanitch reported one week after the events that he was painting lace.¹⁴⁸ The delicacy of this material painted by a male artist appears to me a poignant reference to the absurd impossibility of 9/11, which I define as cause for this inner emigration.¹⁴⁹ Diverting their efforts from ongoing art projects, the response by Flack and Zakanitch is akin to the ethereal nature of the *Starns’ Fallen Series*.

The desperation of remembrance found its outlet in broad and outspoken controversies. The social acceptance of art that directly dealt with or visualized 9/11 was put to the test over and over again in the years following the events. The public discourse found its outlet in individual protest, on web blogs, letters to the

¹⁴⁵ Thomas, “The Road Ahead.” 40.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Arthur Danto. “The Art of 9/11.” *The Nation* (Sept. 5, 2002), <http://www.thenation.com/article/art-911> (Aug. 15, 2011).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ The term ‘inner emigration’ was first coined by the writer Frank Thiess in 1933 who specifically applied it to the political situation in Germany. I define the expression as a conscious disregard of a troubling public or political situation.

editor, and in scholarly essays. This discussion also concerned public art. The nature of statements and reactions surveyed reveals that artists who have worked in public environments were particularly aware and more politically outspoken than others. On the following pages, selected major projects provide a glimpse of the extent of the cultural renewal and extensive critical discourse that occurred.

4.4 Selected Public Art in Response to 9/11

Public art has the power to create dialogue. New York needed a public outlet to cope and heal, which was painful and, at times, stirred controversy. In this chapter I survey the most prominent public art projects in response to 9/11 as a counterpoint to Doug and Mike Starn's quiet reflection. Select case studies of public art in New York serve to pinpoint artistic responses and their critical reception as the metropolis was recovering from its most extreme event in history. A sculpture by Eric Fischl offers an example of a single artist's work, which is matched by a temporary public art initiative, and the official, permanent memorial. These public works in three genres also provide the connective tissue between the Starns' early work and their first public art commission, a project funded by 9/11 recovery funds.

Eric Fischl: *Tumbling Woman*, 2001

Immediately following 9/11, Neo-expressionist artist Eric Fischl sculpted the near life-size female nude *Tumbling Woman* (Ill. 53) in a personal response. A woman in a crouched position, arms akimbo and head pointed down, is frozen in free-fall. This representation visualizes unrestrained anxiety and uncertainty in a post-9/11 world. The explosive force of this Zeitgeist can no longer be discussed unbiased, knowing that over 200 people fell or jumped to their deaths from the burning upper floors of the World Trade Center, most of whom were never identified, because their bodies disintegrated upon impact and were buried by the imploding structures.

Tumbling Woman caused vehement public protest when Rockefeller Center exhibited the work coinciding with the one-year anniversary of 9/11. A two-week viewing ended ahead of schedule with the removal of the work on September 18.¹⁵⁰ Building management received bomb threats from victims and experienced intense criticism from citizens and the press, the most widely debated being the scathing columns by Andrea Peyser in the *New York Post*.¹⁵¹ Four years later, critic Alison Gillmor addressed the consequences of the incident for public art: "The misunderstanding between Fischl and his intended audience doesn't bode well for the future of public art. Post-9/11, people seemed to want consolation and confirmation from art, not the more complicated and uncomfortable experience of catharsis."¹⁵²

Christy Ferer, a personal friend of the artist who had lost her husband on 9/11, "felt that Fischl had the right to create and exhibit it. Now she's come to the conclusion that the controversy may have been largely a matter of timing. Maybe it was just too soon to show something like that."¹⁵³ Personal and public trauma, combined with abundant reporting by the media, collided with closure in dealing with the past. One year after the catastrophe, the pain and psychological strain continued to cause unfiltered emotional reactions tantamount to questions of piety and respect for the victims, but these are rightly considered within the context of memorialization, time and the type of representation, writes Randall van Schepen:

[...] *Tumbling Woman* was clearly at odds with the dominant, prevailing self-protective behaviors at work in the post-9/11 spectator. I would suggest that Fischl's *Tumbling Woman* contains four such challenges to the post-9/11 viewer. The four "inappropriate" or socially unacceptable features pertinent to *Tumbling Woman*'s reception are: the timing of its creation/display, its use of the body to represent tragic suffering, its depiction of one of the falling bodies, and its representation of a female falling body.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Alison Gillmor, "Freefall: The Story of Eric Fischl's *Tumbling Woman*," *CBC News* (Sept. 8, 2006), <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/tumbling.html> (Aug. 15, 2011).

¹⁵¹ Andrea Peyser, "Shameful Art Attack," *New York Post*, Sept. 18, 2002. 3.
———, "Sick 9/11 Art Yanked," *New York Post* Sept. 19, 2002. 7.

¹⁵² Gillmor, *ibid*.

¹⁵³ Peyser, "Shameful Art Attack."

¹⁵⁴ Randall Van Schepen, "Falling/Failing 9/11: Eric Fischl's *Tumbling Woman* debacle," *Aurora Journal of the History of Art* (Jan. 1, 2008). <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-191476258.html> (Aug. 17, 2011).

The controversy surrounding the *Tumbling Woman* exhibit at Rockefeller Center points to the core dilemma of contemporary art in relationship to public space. Art is defined as serving the higher purpose of interpreting the world. However, context and the question of 'locale', 'private' and 'public' must be considered: whether it would be best to exhibit *Tumbling Women* in the confines of a gallery or museum without public access, because viewers are comfortable dealing with challenging imagery in such an environment. Eric Fischl, a voice against fear and political agitation, argues against degrading art to mere decoration, while noting the lack of education on coping in an interview with New York Times reporter David Rakoff:

Right now we're shrinking away from truth. No one can criticize the president because we're in a very vulnerable time, even though he's doing some things that are terrifying. You can't express your personal horror and trauma at something that we all experienced. I think that what happened is that since the 60's there's been an ambition that art merge itself with pop culture. At first it was an ironic stance, and then it became actually a real thing; people wanted to have art as a playground and as entertainment. And that's fine in good times, but when something terrible or powerful or meaningful happens, you want an art that speaks to that, that embraces the language that would carry us forward, bring us together, all of that stuff. I think that September 11 showed us that as an art world we weren't quite qualified to deal with this. Not trained enough to handle it.¹⁵⁵

Fischl, traditionally a gallery artist, does not differentiate between the private and the public.¹⁵⁶ Thus, by exposing the private in public he creates controversy.¹⁵⁷ With his focus on the *nude*, a subject the American public is not comfortable with, he challenges regulatory ordinances for many high-pedestrian environments administered by government agencies or public art programs. Those programs

¹⁵⁵ Rakoff, David. "The Way We Live Now: 10-27-02: Questions for Eric Fischl; Post-9/11 Modernism," *New York Times Magazine* (October 27, 2002). 34.

¹⁵⁶ Of the *Tumbling Women* bronze edition of six, five works were sold to private collectors, while one has been on loan at the Phoenix Art Museum, where it has been installed on the museum grounds, according to Ron Warren, Director of Mary Boone Gallery, in an email. Ron Warren, "Inquiry RE Eric Fischl: Tumbling Woman " (Aug. 9, 2011).

¹⁵⁷ In 2000, Fischl's 14-foot tall nude bronze of tennis star Arthur Ashe was installed at the entrance to New York's National Tennis Center - Arthur Ashe Stadium, provoking a public furor.

specifically exclude nudity, religious or political subjects in public places in order to create common ground for a multicultural and multi-ethnic society.

The question of memory and memorialization continues to incense public sentiment. The trauma of the falling bodies was documented by press photographer Richard Drew of the Associated Press in his instantly legendary *The Falling Man*. In the photograph, an unidentified, falling man is silhouetted against the façade of the North Tower at 9:41:15. The image was published September 12, 2001 on page 7 of the *New York Times* and in hundreds of newspapers, print and online media worldwide.¹⁵⁸ This image was also engulfed in prolonged public dialog regarding the ethical ramifications of showing it, prompting Fischl to write several years later: "In this country, all the images of the dead and dying, of those who jumped or fell, have been suppressed."¹⁵⁹ Fischl observes a great truth: documenting reality can become socially unbearable or unacceptable in contemporary mass media culture, where a similarly staged movie scene may still capture fascinated attention.

Eric Fischl's *Tumbling Woman* represents an example of an individual artistic response he intended to share publicly. The delicate issues surrounding his visualization of trauma were exposed during the sculpture's exhibition at Rockefeller Center. While the Starns turned away from the limelight in quiet introspection, the tragedy's haunting images led Fischl to cast his bronze. As the public attention subsides, the sculpture is silently taking its place as a validated response to and representation of 9/11.

Tribute in Light, annually at the September 11 Anniversary, 2002-2011

Immediately after the 9/11 attack countless spontaneous memorials appeared at the World Trade Center site and in other public places across Manhattan. They usually consisted of flowers, candles, and personal mementos. Thousands of flyers featured images of missing persons, featured written statements or drawings.

¹⁵⁸ Tom Junod, "The Falling Man," *Esquire* (Sept. 8, 2009), http://www.esquire.com/features/ESQ0903-SEP_FALLINGMAN. (Aug. 15, 2011).

¹⁵⁹ Eric Fischl. "The Trauma of 9/11 and its Impact on Artists." In: Elaine; Levin King, Gail, ed. *Ethics and the Visual Arts* (New York: Allworth Press, 2006). 195.

These public statements were removed within weeks, but the call for temporary acknowledgment remained until a permanent memorial could be built. A lighting concept evolved quickly in the following weeks. From 2002 to 2011 the Municipal Art Society of New York produced the *Towers of Light* (later renamed *Tribute in Light*) installation of 88 searchlights, which formed two vertical columns of light on the anniversary day. Ten years after 9/11, the National September 11 Memorial and Museum was dedicated at the World Trade Center site, bringing closure and a new beginning.

The commission for *Tribute in Light* was awarded to Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda (Ill. 54). In 1999 they had received a grant from the art funder Creative Time to realize their project *Bioluminescent Beacon*, which was scheduled for installation in fall 2002 atop the 360-foot tall radio antenna on Tower One.¹⁶⁰ They participated in the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's (LMCC) World Views artist-in-residence program on the 91st floor, where they had worked through spring 2001 to create the drawings and maquettes for the work. Their initial project was to turn the light impulses emitted by water-based, phosphorescent organisms into electrical energy by working with light sensors energy. Creative Time connected the artists with *New York Times* editors in connection with a story who invited them to share an immediate reaction to 9/11. In response, Myoda and LaVerdiere developed their *Phantom Towers* proposal of two columns of light against Manhattan's night sky, which was published on the cover of the September 23 issue of *New York Times Magazine*.¹⁶¹

Independent of Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda, architects John Bennett and Gustavo Bonevardi had developed their almost synonymous *PRISM (Project to Immediately Restore the Skyline of Manhattan)* concept.¹⁶² The architect team had widely distributed their concept of floating rectilinear towers to peers and other

¹⁶⁰ David Ebony, "Towers of Light for New York City," *Art in America* Vol. 89, issue 11 (Nov. 2001). 35.

¹⁶¹ "Filling the Void: A Memorial by Paul Myoda and Julian LaVerdiere," *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 23, 2001. Cover. In 2002 the Society for Publication Design awarded for this image Cover of the Year Award to the *New York Times*.

¹⁶² "Tribute in Light: John Bennett and Gustavo Bonevardi," Creative Time, http://www.creativetime.org/programs/archive/2002/tribute/jb_gb.html (Aug. 15, 2011). – The site features *Tribute in Light* with a link to Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda, and a *Tribute in Light* bibliography.

professionals ahead of the New York Times feature, receiving overwhelmingly positive feedback. Bennett said it was "our way of saying 'we're back and you can't hold us down.' Since we can't save lives we tried to respond to public needs with architecture."¹⁶³ *PRISM*'s main difference from the *Phantom Towers* proposal was that this rendering featured the light installation hovering over the Hudson River near the former location of the World Trade Center.

Upon realizing their concurring ideas the four decided to collaborate, last but not least because they hoped for a better chance to realize *Towers of Light*. They then added lighting designers Paul Marantz and Jules Fisher, as well as engineers, to the collaborative team. Their joint proposal called for 80 high-intensity xenon lights, commonly known as space cannons, to be arranged at a building lot near Battery Park City.¹⁶⁴ This latter location offered detachment from the emotional and political connotations of Ground Zero, which was closed due to the ongoing work there. David Ebony gave a detailed description of the course of events along with the team's intention:

Without interfering with the ongoing recovery efforts, the light beams would add to the Manhattan skyline a suggestion of the commanding physical presence of the twin towers while evoking the immaterial essence of those killed in the attack, many of whose remains may never be found. Rather than a memorial, however, *Towers of Light* is seen by the group as a symbol of hope and resiliency, a reclamation of New York City's strength and identity.¹⁶⁵

In addition to Creative Capital and LMCC, the New York Municipal Art Society became the primary sponsor of the \$500,000 endeavor.¹⁶⁶ *Tribute in Light*—the final title of the project—was first realized six months after 9/11 on March 11, 2002 from dawn until dusk and since then annually on the anniversary day with funds raised privately each year by the Municipal Art Society.¹⁶⁷ I concur with David Dunlap's assessment of the positive quality in the reading and interpretation

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Battery Park City administers its own independent public art program, thus adding to the feasibility of the site by offering an administrative team capable of managing the logistics.

¹⁶⁵ Ebony, "Towers of Light for New York City." *Art in America* Vol. 89, issue 11 (Nov. 2001). 35

¹⁶⁶ David Dunlap, "From 88 Searchlights, an Ethereal Tribute," *New York Times*, Mar. 4, 2002. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/04/nyregion/04LIGH.html> (Aug. 6, 2011)

¹⁶⁷ ———, "'Tribute in Light' Will Keep Shining, This Year and the Next," in *New York Times City Room* (<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com>, Sept. 10, 2010).

of this abstract work of art at the tenth production on the occasion of the 2010 event:

By virtue of the tribute's silence, constancy and anonymity—indeed, its near-mystery—it is a 9/11 memorial that can symbolize anything a viewer cares to impute. In fact, it can symbolize nothing whatsoever and just be an enjoyable nighttime spectacle, with the bonus of a thrilling optical illusion in which the beams seem to bend gently toward the viewer as one's eyes travel upward.¹⁶⁸

I consider the ephemeral and spiritual quality of this work key to its feasibility. Faced with today's oversaturation of images through omnipresent communication and media channels, the individual yearns for evocative moments that exist outside of transmittable reality, disconnected from the fleeting moment, however sensitive that may be. The work becomes a magical experience, beyond a simple physical presence, year after year. This timelessness has been crucial to the success of *Tribute in Light*, enjoyable beyond the limitations of any prior experience by any human being.

Michael Arad and Peter Walker, *The National September 11 Memorial*, dedicated 2011

"Memorials," writes philosopher and art columnist Arthur Danto, "use art as a means of transforming pain into beauty."¹⁶⁹ While individual artists find their own ways to respond to our world, the question of memory and its representation presents itself ever more urgently. The field of memory studies has exploded since the 1980s. Leading scholars are John Bodnar, David Lowenthal and Pierre Nora, to name but a few.¹⁷⁰ Memorials take on an increasing presence in public spaces, which I see in direct correlation to the growing public art programs during that period. Worthy causes, individuals, and events allow an active populace the

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Danto, "The Art of 9/11".(Aug. 6, 2011).

¹⁷⁰ David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992); John R. Gillis, ed. *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994); Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London, 1994); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York, 1995); Pierre Nora. *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, 3 vols. (New York, 1996–98).

gathering of manifold resources toward realizing visibility, be it temporary or permanent.

From the beginning, reconstruction of the WTC site included plans for a memorial. In February 2003, Daniel Libeskind's proposal was selected by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC)¹⁷¹ as the master site plan.¹⁷² Central architectural landmark of the design is a 1776-foot tower symbolizing the Year of Independence, thus higher than the original twin towers. An independent international competition was hosted for the design of the 9/11 Memorial itself in 2003, for which Daniel Libeskind defined the site in his master plan:

The great slurry wall is the most dramatic element which survived the attack, an engineering wonder constructed on bedrock foundations and designed to hold back the Hudson River. The foundations withstood the unimaginable trauma of the destruction and stand as eloquent as the Constitution itself asserting the durability of Democracy and the value of individual life. We have to be able to enter this ground while creating a quiet, meditative and spiritual space. We need to journey down, some 30 feet into the Ground Zero Memorial site, past the slurry wall, a procession with deliberation. The Memorial site remains protected from the dynamic activities of a revitalized new neighborhood.¹⁷³

Within the 16-acre master plan, the competition guidelines for the memorial requested the commemorative interpretation on the 4.7-acre-site of the obliterated twin towers to "remember and honor all loss of life on September 11, 2001 and February 26, 1993 and the contributions of all without establishing any hierarchies."¹⁷⁴ It is of note that the 9/11 memorial competition guidelines also addressed those who died in the previous, 1993 WTC bombing. The winning design, *Reflecting Absence*, developed by architect Michael Arad and landscape architect Peter Walker, was dedicated ten years after the tragedy on September 11,

¹⁷¹ The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) was formed in September 2001 specifically to plan and revitalize Lower Manhattan following 9/11.

¹⁷² Daniel Libeskind, "Ground Zero Master Plan," Studio Daniel Libeskind, <http://daniel-libeskind.com/projects/ground-zero-master-plan>. (Apr. 30, 2012).

¹⁷³ In: "World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition Guidelines," (New York, NY: Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, 2003). 10-11.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. Cover letter: Invitation to Compete, co-signed by Governor George Pataki and Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

2011 (Ill. 55-56). The complementing underground Memorial Museum was designed by Davis, Brody Bond Aedas architects, though I will limit my analysis to the memorial, i.e. public art. Norwegian architects Snøhetta designed the Museum's entry pavilion.

The international World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition attracted 13,683 registrants and no fewer than 5,201 Memorial submissions from 63 nations. In its July 17, 2003, press release, the LMDC also outlined the competition process and extensive public engagement related to the competition.¹⁷⁵ In the competition guidelines LMDC clearly states its dedication to public process: "LMDC is committed to an open, inclusive, and transparent planning process in which the public has a central role in shaping the future of Lower Manhattan,"¹⁷⁶ thus reflecting and responding to the unprecedented public interest. Christoph Faulhaber devoted his monograph *New York, NY 10047/48*, titled after the New York City zip codes of the World Trade Center, to the public process surrounding reconstruction, wittingly subtitled his study "a memorial of a process."¹⁷⁷ Correspondingly, Nancy Princenthal writes a thorough analysis of the competition process. The public pressure is reflected in her observation:

The mission statement and proposal guidelines that the jury and the LMDC developed, like all other aspects of the redevelopment of the WTC site, were shaped by the extraordinary degree of public scrutiny. [...] The jurors were protected by an extraordinary degree of security, to guard their physical and psychological well-being as well as the integrity of the process.¹⁷⁸

The intensely observed competition and its extensive process are indicative of the large new audience for contemporary public art and an extensive debate on the nature of memorialization. On the one hand, public art has increased its presence in contemporary culture, while on the other hand the complexities of the process preempt the outcome.

¹⁷⁵ From the press release "Lower Lower Manhattan Development Corporation Announced Final Number of Submissions for the World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition: Largest Design Competition in History," (Jul. 17, 2003).

¹⁷⁶ "World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition Guidelines." (2002). 2.

¹⁷⁷ Christoph Faulhaber, *New York, NY 10047/48: The Public Process of Rebuilding the World Trade Center after September 11 2001* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2011).

¹⁷⁸ Nancy Princenthal, "Absence Visible," *Art in America* Vol. 92, issue 4 (Apr. 2004). 40

The main feature of the *National September 11 Memorial* are two reflecting pools covering the original footprints of the towers. Interestingly, the design chosen was very similar to sketches by jury member Maya Lin, which had been published in the *New York Times Magazine* as one of several design proposals on September 8, 2002.¹⁷⁹ A comparison of both the *9/11 Memorial* and *Tribute in Light* lead to the conclusion that the proposals published prior to the competitions strongly influenced the final outcome of *Tribute in Light*, as well as both Daniel Libeskind's master plan and Michael Arad's memorial design.

Thus widespread interest and preoccupation with the design before a procurement process had been established led to a preconceived notion of the outcome. Neither competition entrants nor jury members were able to divest themselves of these influences, established also by consensus in 2002 through extensive public process, including a publicly published site plan.¹⁸⁰

Following his selection as one of the eight finalists, Michael Arad (born 1969) was paired with esteemed landscape architect Peter Walker to improve the landscape design at the suggestion of the jury.¹⁸¹ Additional finalists were Gisela Baurmann, Sawad Brooks and Jonas Coersmeier; Bradley Campbell and Matthias Neumann; Pierre David with Sean Corriel and Jessica Kmetovic; Karadin with Hsin-Yi Wu; Norman Lee and Michael Lewis; Toshio Sasaki; Brian Strawn and Karla Sierralta, all from the United States with the exception of Pierre David's team from Paris, France. Winning the competition propelled Michael Arad, a young architect on the staff of the New York City Housing Authority, to international prominence. Walker's firm offered the necessary capacity, experience, and knowledge to manage the \$1 billion project scope.

¹⁷⁹ An entire, edited issue of the *New York Times Magazine* was devoted to 9/11 memorial proposals: Herberg Muschamps, "Masters' Plan," *New York Times Magazine* (Sept. 8, 2002).

¹⁸⁰ Compare Christoph Faulhaber, *New York, NY 10047/48: The Public Process of Rebuilding the World Trade Center after September 11 2001*. 50-51, Figure 15.

¹⁸¹ Proposals are posted at www.wtcsitememorial.org/finalists.html. (Mar. 15, 2012).

The most prominent feature of the winning design, *Reflecting Absence* (Ill. 55-56), is two recessed pools of water with perimeter walkways 30 feet below ground. At the center of each water cascades down an opening, which can be viewed from the interior, 60 feet below-ground museum and meditation chamber. A smaller reflecting pool sits at the base of the south-tower footprint, while an open-air chamber at the center of the north-tower footprint holds a cube-shaped mausoleum shrine containing unidentified remains. The pools are connected by an underground passage with two rooms at each end, one for quiet reflection, and the other to hold mementos left behind by visitors. On a stone ledge lining the pools the names of the victims appear in proximity to each other according to their location that day.¹⁸²

Conceptually, scale and design of the September 11 memorial is comparable to the program of one related antecedent: the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum by Butzer Design Partnership.¹⁸³ In 1995, 168 people were killed and the Oklahoma City federal building destroyed by a car bomb placed by American terrorist Timothy McVeigh. The entire 3.3-acre site became a memorial dominated by a reflecting pool within a park, the museum, and other visitor amenities. Familiarity with recent events there elucidates advocates' demand to reserve the entire WTC site for a national monument. Reflecting pools with their meditative qualities follow a grand tradition in memorial architecture, originating in the United States with the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., or the pool fronting the Taj Mahal, India's world-renowned mausoleum of the mid-17th-century. The water cascades surrounding the World Trade Center memorial pools, however, depart from the meditative stillness by introducing an important sound element in the very midst of Manhattan's pulsating urban life. Further below, at the foot of the cascade, the rushing water dominates the experience, simulating power, energy, and life, while connoting the rebirth of lower Manhattan after the attacks.

¹⁸² See Nick Paumgarten, "The Names," *New Yorker* (May 16, 2011). 154.

¹⁸³ "History and Mission," Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum, <http://www.oklahomacitynationalmemorial.org/secondary.php?section=1&catid=193>. (Dec. 3, 2011).

5. The Agency: Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit

In 2005, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) issued a call to artists inviting applications for a \$1 million public art project at South Ferry Subway Station, which was being reconstructed with funds from the federal 9/11 Recovery Act. Doug and Mike Starn were invited to submit their qualifications and won the competition, resulting in their first public art commission. The subsequent overview of the agency and its public art program provides the framework for the South Ferry Station project, followed by a detailed evaluation of the competition, design, fabrication and installation.

The MTA's average weekday ridership approaches 8.5 million on nearly 400 rail and subway lines, as well as bus routes. 735 rail and subway stations serve 2,000 miles of tracks in the New York metro region.¹⁸⁴ The largest public transit system of the United States was launched in 1904 with the privately chartered Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT), followed by Brooklyn Rapid Transit (BRT) and the municipally owned Independent Transit (IND). In 1940, at the end of the Depression, the City acquired the privately operated subway lines, which were merged under the newly created Metropolitan Transportation Authority in 1953.¹⁸⁵ The current Arts for Transit public art program for art in subway stations has been in existence since 1985. It is based on the original design guidelines for stations with its reinstatement being linked to the public art movement of the latter 20th century.¹⁸⁶

5.1 Rebuilding and Improving New York's Infrastructure after 9/11

The September 11 attacks directly impacted MTA public transit, leading to the collapse of the 1 Train subway tunnel beneath the World Trade Center, which

¹⁸⁴ "A Decade After 9/11 – Rebuilding Lower Manhattan," Metropolitan Transit Authority, www.mta.info/news/stories/?story=375. (Oct. 29, 2011).

¹⁸⁵ Sandra Bloodworth, *Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2006). 13-14.

¹⁸⁶ The MTA Arts for Transit Program is described in detail in chapter 5.2

included Cortland Street Station. Service south of Chambers Street was disrupted for one full year while the tunnel was rebuilt. As part of the larger New York development agenda to revitalize Lower Manhattan following 9/11, the MTA undertook two major infrastructure improvement projects. The first one was to add capacity to South Ferry Station at the terminus of the 1 line, where passengers transfer to the Staten Island ferries. One block east of the World Trade Center site, the new Fulton Street Transit Center represents the second innovation within New York's public transit system, offering direct pedestrian access to the World Trade Center site via an underground concourse and connecting eleven subway lines.¹⁸⁷ Corresponding with the overall budgets for the Fulton Street and South Ferry projects, the potential for public art was unprecedented, as well: "Both of these greatly exceed the scope of all previous projects in their opportunities for the creation and installation of artwork in the transportation system."¹⁸⁸ Overall, the federal government issued funds totaling \$4.55 billion to rebuild Lower Manhattan's damaged infrastructure. Final South Ferry Station construction cost amounted to \$530 million (the original budget was \$400 million) including the \$1 million art budget.¹⁸⁹

5.2 *The MTA Arts for Transit Program*

The MTA's Arts for Transit program is rooted in the New York City subway founders' belief that creating a system with high quality design and craftsmanship would enhance the users' experience. This was reflected in the initial planning for the New York City subway by chief engineer William Barklay Parsons as early as 1899: "The railway and its equipment as contemplated by the contract constitute a great public work. All parts of the structure where exposed to the public sight shall therefore be designed, constructed, and maintained with a view to the beauty of

¹⁸⁷ "A Decade After 9/11 – Rebuilding Lower Manhattan". www.mta.info/news/stories/?story=375 (October 29, 2011).

¹⁸⁸ Bloodworth, *Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit*. 19.

¹⁸⁹ Caroline Cole, "See it Split, See it Change, and See it All for the Price of a Subway Ticket," *MetropolisMag.com* (Jan. 15, 2009). www.metropolismag.com/pov/20090115/see-it-split-see-it-change-and-see-it-all-for-the-price-of-a-subway-ticket (October 29, 2011).

their appearance as well as to their efficiency.”¹⁹⁰ The firm Heins and LaFarge, architects of the Bronx Zoo and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, were charged with the task of fulfilling this objective.

Preferred materials for ease of maintenance, durability and a broad array of design options were mosaic, ceramic tile and terra cotta, usually featuring decorative elements. Contemporary applications of tile and mosaic continue to reinvent these historic materials. The tasteful, historic way-finding and decorative elements designed by George Heins and Christopher Grant LaFarge consist of ornamentation inspired by art of the Classical period or Art Nouveau. They introduce color and visual order to the underground environment, while serving to identify the stations and to distinguish them from each other. Typical examples are the detailed mosaic and ceramic station signs of Times Square station (Ill. 57) and the terra-cotta panels at Astor Place and Columbus Circle (Ill. 58). Machine Age-inspired decoration adorned the stations of the Brooklyn-Manhattan and the municipal lines, constructed between 1925 and 1940.

During the 1980s, major rehabilitation efforts led to the formation of the Arts for Transit program, in part to restore and preserve the historic elements, but newly charged also with the task to continue building the collection. The purpose of Arts for Transit is to manage artist selection processes, implementation, and care of permanent public art in subway and commuter rail stations. The MTA collection encompasses New York City Transit, Metro-North Railroad, Long Island Rail Road, and the bridges and tunnels seen by millions of travelers every year. The MTA Arts for Transit program was officially initiated in 1985 in conjunction with the Percent for Art legislation administered by the Department of Cultural Affairs of New York State, which allocates one percent of public building construction for the installation of artworks.

Introduction of the MTA’s Arts for Transit program followed on the heels of several decades of declining interest in public transportation and a focus on the automobile after World War II. The formation of the new Percent for Art ordinance occurred at

¹⁹⁰ Bloodworth, *Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit*. 12.

a critical juncture in American perception of public space and the built environment, galvanized by the growing field of public art and the historic preservation movement. By 2010, the Arts for Transit program's collection had grown to approximately 200 artworks in mosaic, terra-cotta, bronze, faceted glass, and mixed media.

Current Design Standards and Artist Selection Process

An important discussion of public art in the 1980s concerned the relationship of artwork to its surroundings. Program director Sandra Bloodworth describes Arts for Transit's place-based approach, which considers the function and relationship of the artwork within its environment, reversing a trend of art in public spaces as mere object from the 1950s to the 1970s:

Arts for Transit was, from the beginning, determined to change the direction of contemporary site-specific art, to encourage something different—and better. Public art within the transportation system would look to its own environment to determine its form. It seemed clear that if a system had hundreds of thousands of feet of wall space, then that wall space should be used, particularly since time had demonstrated its potential for posterity.¹⁹¹

Improving the design quality of New York's transportation infrastructure and consequently the overall quality of the cityscape was reinstated as a declared goal, newly termed by Brown and Rubin in 2000 as "place-making".¹⁹² The place-making agenda within the urban design framework is one of the authors' six key definitions of public art, which also includes the integration of art and architecture:

A multi-disciplinary design team approach wherein artists work on project teams with architects, engineers, landscape architects and other design professionals to design and create public projects, such as transit systems or waste water treatment facilities to achieve the highest aesthetic innovation. This approach may also result in artist-designed functional elements that are integrated into the project such as flooring, furniture, lights fixtures, fencing, tree grates, etc.¹⁹³

All Arts for Transit projects aim to establish connections to neighborhoods, while corresponding with each station's history and design. Sites and parameters for

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 14.

¹⁹² Brenda Brown, *Public Art Funding*. 2.

¹⁹³ Ibid. 2.

artworks are chosen working closely with MTA architects and engineers, followed by a competitive selection process. The review can be based either on an open call to artists, an invitational process or, a combination of both, depending on project scope. Various sources are employed to identify potential artists, such as the Percent for Art Slide Registry of New York's Department of Cultural Affairs or project managers' ongoing research.

The artist selection process of the MTA's Arts for Transit program is structured like other open competitions conducted by public agencies in the United States and internationally.¹⁹⁴ Usually based a two-tier review, artists first respond to a request for qualifications and submit documentation of past work. The commissioning organization forms an artist selection committee comprised of key stakeholders for the project. Panels generally include the project architect, landscape architect or other design professionals as adequate, community representatives and art professionals. Committee sizes vary, but a minimum of five is recommended, though numbers can be higher depending on the specific agency or the complexity of the project. The committee narrows the applicant pool to a small shortlist of finalists who are invited to prepare a proposal in the form of a schematic design that typically includes a rendering, a narrative, potential subcontractors or fabricators and a line-item budget. U.S. best practices prescribe that finalists receive an honorarium for this work. The finalists present their proposals to the committee, which then votes on the best or most appropriate design for the site.

5.3 The South Ferry Subway Station

South Ferry Station is located at the tip of Manhattan adjacent to Battery Park and the Staten Island Ferry Terminal, serving as transportation hub with access to four subway lines, three bus lines, and taxis for up to 100,000 people each day.

Approaching Manhattan from Staten Island, the breathtaking New York skyline

¹⁹⁴ Individual public art programs are bound by internal process guidelines, which should reflect current professional standards. In the U.S., resources related to best practices for public art administration including Call for Artist Guidelines are available online from the national platform for professional standards in the field, the Public Art Network of Americans for the Arts at www.artsusa.org/networks/public_art_network/resources_tools.asp.

rises before those entering the Staten Island Ferry Terminal, the new, partially solar-powered glass structure by Frederic Schwartz Architects. The waiting room features sculptured granite benches by artist Ming Fay. Exiting the terminal building under a sweeping entry canopy, the traveler traverses Peter Minuit Plaza with its uniquely designed street furniture and interpretive markers of local history, providing transfer to subway, buses, and taxis. To the west, the pedestrian enters Battery Park with its magnificent view of the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island and New York harbor. Heading north, the architecture surrounding the station comprises historic brick buildings of several stories and high-rises, dedicated to a mix of office, retail, hotel, cultural, and residential uses.

The 1904 construction of South Ferry Station, as one of the New York's first IRT subway stations by Heins & LaFarge architects, signals public transit priority for the Staten Island ferry terminal. The terminus of the 1 train was originally constructed as a two-track station for a much smaller number of commuters, with only one exit and no access for persons with disabilities, thus lacking compliance with contemporary standards. More significantly, the platforms provided space for only five subway cars, forcing passengers in rear cars to walk toward the front of the train in order to exit to the platform. With today's ten-car standard trains, this caused significant delays.¹⁹⁵ Following 9/11, safety considerations for high-traffic environments were revised and improved across the United States, led by the newly formed Department of Homeland Security, allowing the MTA to procure monies to upgrade the station to improve efficiency and speed.

Structurally, South Ferry Subway Station rebuilding lengthened the platform, opened three entrances to improve pedestrian flow to ferries, buses and connection to the Whitehall station, as well as to surrounding destinations in the neighborhood (see Ill. 69). For the Percent-for-Art project, the walls of the underground control area were determined to be the ideal site for a public art feature.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Sandra Bloodworth, "Interview by Christina Lanzl," (New York, NY: Metropolitan Transit Authority Arts for Transit, Mar. 17, 2011).

¹⁹⁶ Vel Riberto, "Minutes to File: Artist Selection for South Ferry Subway Station," (New York, NY: Metropolitan Transit Authority Arts for Transit, Feb. 14, 2005). 2.

A 1905 terra-cotta relief of sailboats near the shore by station architects Heins & LaFarge was situated along the upper wall section. Notable also is Sandra Bloodworth's past engagement by the Arts for Transit Program as commissioned artist for a contemporary adaptation of the Heins & LaFarge sailboat theme in 1990 (Ill. 59). Neither of these two artworks is installed for public viewing today,¹⁹⁷ after the replacement of the old station by the newly designed South Ferry Subway station.

Still existing, however, is Whitehall Street station's *Passages* by Frank Giorgini, commissioned during a restoration in 2000.¹⁹⁸ Whitehall was adjoined to the redesigned South Ferry station, which officially opened in 2009. Giorgini's insets of profiled, flying seagulls in glazed ceramic tile line the upper section of the escalator descending to the R and W lines, whose design reflects the historic architecture (Ill. 60-61). Further down, the greeting seabirds are succeeded by a eye-level sequence of five irregularly shaped ceramic tile reliefs illustrating Manhattan history from the present day back to Native American times with vignettes highlighting the age of steamships, the New Amsterdam era and first settlement. Above each scene, bands of blue mosaic sky stretch to the ceiling. Nearby artist designed railings in the form of cattails complete this ode to the city's past.¹⁹⁹ Although skillfully executed and rich in detail, Giorgini's pseudo-historic technique disappoints, because it lacks verve. The works' siting along the escalator is unfortunate, since the detailed scenes cannot be appreciated fully in passing. The artist-designed railing does offer creative impulse for unique functional elements, however, ultimately realized in the new South Ferry station, as well.

¹⁹⁷ Xiomara Martinez-White; Sergey Kadinsky, "Opening of new South Ferry Station," *NYC on Deadline* Mar. 16, 2009. <http://nycondedeadline.journalism.cuny.edu/2009/03/16/opening-of-new-south-ferry-station> (Feb. 26, 2012).

¹⁹⁸ Artist Frank Giorgini also authored the instructor's textbook *Handmade Tiles*, Asheville, NC: Lark Books, 1994.

¹⁹⁹ Whitehall Street artwork description is included in Bloodworth, *Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit*. 187.

5.4 Artist Selection Process for the Redesigned South Ferry Subway Station

In 2004, MTA Arts for Transit issued its national open call to artists for the new Fulton Street Transit Center, for which it received over 300 entries. With the art selection process for the South Ferry Subway Station project following on its heels, the Arts for Transit administration issued a request to the MTA for a preference to draw from the Fulton Street artist pool, while indicating a readiness to issue a separate call. The request to utilize the Fulton Street entries was granted. Project manager Vel Riberto assembled for review a focused pool of approximately fifty artists, including artists identified through research who she approached individually with an invitation to apply for the project.²⁰⁰ Doug and Mike Starn were among the artists who followed Ms. Riberto's call to submit their qualifications. By their own admission, they would not have thought of applying because they were preoccupied with other projects, including two museum exhibitions: their *Behind Your Eye* solo show was on view at the Neuberger Museum of Art from March 7 through August 8, 2004, and the *Gravity of Light* traveling exhibition was launched at the Färgfabriken Kunsthalle in Stockholm, Sweden.²⁰¹

The first South Ferry Station selection committee meeting took place on November 9, 2004, with a voting panel comprised of an artist, arts professionals, community representatives, and in-house personnel. Chaired by MTA Arts for Transit director Sandra Bloodworth, the voting members were executive director of Art in General Holly Block, artist James Carpenter, Skyscraper Museum director Carol Willis and New York City Transit principal architect Franz Zwolensky of CPM Structures. The five voting members were complemented by twenty-eight invited, non-voting representatives of the Borough of Manhattan and the State of New York.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Sandra Bloodworth, "Interview by Christina Lanzl." Though not verified by Bloodworth, one has to assume almost with certainty that MTA Arts for Transit Manager Vel Riberto saw at least one of the *Behind Your Eye* reviews during her summer 2004 research on potential artists for the South Ferry Subway Station project, or that she may have received the catalog brochure in the mail, inspiring her to ask Doug and Mike for a submission.

²⁰¹ Doug and Mike Starn, "Interview by Christina Lanzl," (Beacon, NY: Starn Studio, Mar. 18, 2011).

²⁰² Riberto, "Minutes to File: Artist Selection for South Ferry Subway Station." 1. The entire artist selection process is documented in Vel Riberto's MTA Arts for Transit *Minutes to File* of February 14, 2005.

The South Ferry Station artist selection panel narrowed the initial applicant pool of approximately fifty artists, organized in two groups, to a shortlisted group of twelve, which was then discussed in detail and voted on again to arrive at five finalists.²⁰³ Polly Apfelbaum, Olive Ayhens, Walton Ford, Doug and Mike Starn, and Suikang Zhao received the most votes to qualify them as finalists, along with two alternates. Of these five, Walton Ford, known for his large-scale, satirical and politically inspired watercolors, declined the invitation to prepare a proposal for the South Ferry Station project. All finalists were based and/or represented in New York, which reflects the general composition of artist origins in the MTA's collection. The city, ranking as the epicenter of the visual arts, offers the prime resources for any public art project within its perimeter.

The four remaining finalists were invited to develop their place-based proposals for the South Ferry Subway Station between November 9, 2004, and February 4, 2005.²⁰⁴ An initial artist orientation meeting was led by Vel Riberto and Franz Zwolensky at New York City Transit to give an overview of the Arts for Transit Permanent Art Program, the selection process, proposal requirements, and the South Ferry Station project within the context of its Manhattan location and abutting communities. In partnership with the Arts for Transit manager the architect reviewed the plans for the station rehabilitation relative to visibility, traffic patterns, and lighting of the location for the artwork. Suggestions for potential materials and fabrication were shared. Also present at this informational meeting was Jonathan Kuhn of New York City's Parks and Recreation Department to relate the important connection of the station to the Battery Park neighborhood. A \$3,000 proposal development fee was paid to each artist.

The four finalists presented their proposals to the panel on February 4, 2005. Panelists were instructed by MTA staff to vote for the best proposal, while considering the site and the community. Broad idea and design concepts had been solicited from the finalists, to be further developed once the commission was confirmed. The first presenter, Olive Ayhens, who works in watercolor and ink and

²⁰³ Ibid. 3.

²⁰⁴ ———, "Update Artwork for South Ferry Station," (New York, NY: Metropolitan Transit Authority Arts for Transit, February 1, 2005). n.p.

often producing cityscapes of New York City at her former studio in the World Trade Center, proposed detailed drawings of actual and fictional New York scenes that would swing across the white, curved station walls in luminous bands of color (Ill. 62). She proposed a sequence of near-by, Manhattan city scenes in pastel tones, inspired by studying books about the area and drawing at various spots in the neighborhood. The installation would offer passers-by continued surprise from a distance and interest up-close in site-specific sequences. This traditional design in scope and execution did not sway the committee.

Painter Polly Apfelbaum's *Millefiori* (Ill. 63) concept introduced colorful flowers in combination with an abstracted, florally embellished MTA subway map, symbolizing celebration, rebirth, and peace. Brilliantly colored, blossoms could bloom up to eight feet across the nine feet between floor and ceiling. Created as multicolored woodblock prints, the design could be fabricated as tile or porcelain enamel. MTA officials were concerned that the altered subway map might confuse customers, but Apfelbaum indicated that she would further develop the proposal.

Chinese-born artist Suikang Zhao, a New York resident since 1986, introduced his varied concept alluding to our multi-cultural society, life, rebirth, and growth in New York City. His roots imagery (Ill. 64) included a three-dimensional component of raised relief, glass mosaic roots spreading across the upper half of the walls. Complementing the roots would be small-scale, silk-screened portraits of people. Third, the metal gates to the control area would incorporate words in different languages. Zhao noted the greater appeal of sculptural form, and though the panel raised concerns about cleaning and maintenance, his proposal came in second. Although not mentioned in the jury notes, the work closely emulated the imagery of the recently completed corridor at the 42nd Street-Bryant Park station, where Samm Kuncé's roots spread across the walls—an unfortunate duplication (Ill. 86).

6. Evolution: Context and Continuity in the Work of Doug and Mike Starn

6.1 *The Starn Proposal*

The winning design of the South Ferry Station art competition was created by Doug and Mike Starn (Ill. 65). Built on the ongoing series in the *Absorption of Light* portfolio (see chapter 3.1) and the *Behind Your Eye* installation (see chapter 3.3), the Starns introduced the idea of circulatory systems and proposed to create a photomural of tree portraits from adjacent Battery Park, complemented by a monumental leaf, and a historic map of the Manhattan peninsula. Consistent with the notion of continuity and change, the concept expresses the artists' own universal interpretation in a public offering. The jury minutes of the selection process succinctly state the essence of the Starn brothers' work not just for this one project but, throughout the entire course of their artistic inquiry: "The panel felt strongly for the Starn's [sic] proposal. Their proposal was conceptual and multi-layered with a complex, beauty. Although one questioned if the Starns' proposal might not be colorful enough, the majority of the panel was strongly in favor of it."²⁰⁵

Initially untitled, the South Ferry Station proposal responded to the site systematically by placing it in its location historically and contextually, both within the larger topography at the tip of Manhattan and by zooming in on the Station's immediate environs. Their concept emphasizes the notion of change and renewal. Within this immediate framework, the visual language effectively expresses the complexity of the layers while opening itself up to a new, continuous stream of associations by the viewer. Doug and Mike define the key elements, comprised of a historic map of the tip of Manhattan, a downward facing leaf, and layers of tree branches:

As passengers enter through the turnstiles they will face a telescopic imagining of time and place in a floor-to-ceiling reproduction of a map of the

²⁰⁵ ———, "Minutes to File: Artist Selection for South Ferry Subway Station." 8.

island of Manhattan. They will approach this mural from the same perspective that the Staten Island Ferry approaches the southern tip of the island, aimed uptown, into the heart. [...] Along and above the stairwell leading down to the platform, a parallel image of a tree's discarded leaf echoes the shape of the island and the tracery of its conduits. [...] These ideas are further reinforced by our proposal for the length of the corridor. If finances allow, travelers will pass along the gently undulating corridor lined by the latticed branches of our *Structure of Thought* series.²⁰⁶

The map of Manhattan faces the entrance turnstiles, placed on the wall paralleling the staircase to the 1 train. It is based on a rare 1886 United States Census Bureau map with two layers, recording the original topography from 1640 and an 1880s street plan, which juxtaposes the natural, organic contours with the linear street pattern of the modern city. The accurate depiction of this historic map presents a more appropriate image than the florally embellished map proposed by finalist Polly Apfelbaum. A digitally added perspective symbolizes the passage of time, as it references fly-through models of contemporary architectural animations, enforcing the "perspective" impression intended by the artists. The proposal specifies fabrication of the map in mosaic in a broad color spectrum of stone tesserae.

The deliberately placed leaf references the shape of the map on the adjacent, perpendicular wall. Its exposed veins reinforce the narrative: "the leaf and the island are receptors and givers of energy, speeding the transport of vital resources through their internal networks."²⁰⁷ Thus, transportation unfolds as an essential theme inherent in all natural and manmade systems. The station's purpose to transport people through this node achieves clear articulation. Execution either in Ravenna-style, stone mosaic or a laser photo print laminated onto curved steel panel was envisioned.

The leaf speaks of the tree, introducing the presence of Battery Park aboveground. Careful about the budget, the proposal states that finances needed to be reviewed before a full commitment could be made to designing the entire length of the curved concourse wall travelers face when entering the station control area from the pedestrian plaza above. Here, the ideal convergence of site combines with the

²⁰⁶ Doug and Mike Starn, "Doug and Mike Starn Proposal for South Ferry Terminal Project," (2005).

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

intrinsic logic of thought, amplified by the artists' ongoing *Structure of Thought* series of tree imagery. For the new station, Doug and Mike Starn would photograph onsite at Battery Park, where certain trees were marked for removal to make room for the expansion. They thoughtfully suggested reintegrating the trees visually into the newly built environment. Fabrication involved mounting printed branch layers of clear acetone behind protective architectural glass.

After receiving the commission, the Starns received an invitation from Arts for Transit to expand their contract by designing the concourse fence for the control area, most likely inspired by finalist Suikang Zhao's idea of adding the fence to the artist-designed station elements (see Ill. 64). This inspired scheme elevated the station concourse further yet beyond the merely functional and towards a holistic, meaningful experience by basing its design on the theme of the layered tree mural on the wall running parallel to the fence (Ill. 66). Eight feet high, the 50-foot-long fence was to be fabricated in 3/8" thick, stainless steel. New York State building code safety regulations required that openings in the fence's ornamental pattern had to be below four inches in diameter up to a fence height of thirty-four inches, and smaller than eight inches between 34 and 42 inches above the floor.²⁰⁸ While this requirement generally prevents large objects from being passed through the fence, it also serves to avoid small children's heads from getting stuck, should they play there.

6.2 Work Relevant for the First Public Art Commission

A remarkable continuity permeates the work of Doug and Mike Starn, paired with innovation and change. Of the proposal's three visual elements—map, leaf and trees—only the map constitutes new imagery, serving to reference the site. The South Ferry Station project draws from the *Black Pulse* series of digitally altered scans the artists worked on from 2000-2007, comprised of individual, discarded leaves digitally dissected to expose the veins. *Black Pulse 15* (Ill. 25), the image

²⁰⁸ ———, "Subject: South Ferry Subway Terminal, Fence Designed by Doug and Mike Starn," (2005). n.p.

developed for the public art project, features a complete leaf, unlike the rest of the series, which show signs of decay without exception. The ample width of the South Ferry Station leaf with its emphasized circulatory veins agreeably spreads across the wall, while offering an amenable image to the public.

Specifically noted in the South Ferry Station proposal is the *Structure of Thought* series of trees, begun in 2001 (Ill. 26-29). This series continues the signature Starn style of photo collages and became the Starns' first large-scale digital photomural. The market introduction of digital backs to still cameras made it possible, which allowed production of the 10-foot-high murals at South Ferry Station, whose burly detail required high-definition output of the utmost quality. Tiling the images in preparation for fabrication, however, harkened back to the familiar territory of the artists' early photo collages. Selected works from the featured bodies of work were included in the international traveling exhibition *Absorption of Light* and in the *Behind Your Eye* installation (Ill. 37) at the Neuberger Museum of Art in upstate New York, on view from March 7 - August 8, 2004, just prior to the artist selection process for South Ferry Station.

Black Pulse and Structure of Thought Photo Series, 2000-2007

Black Pulse (Ill. 21-25) and *Structure of Thought* are two series situated among the four bodies of work, grouped together by Doug and Mike Starn in the *Absorption of Light* portfolio. Light as fundamental principle of photography is also its greatest common denominator, whose study reflects the Starns' ambition to advance the medium. To Doug and Mike, the preoccupation with light reflected both technical and metaphorical investigation, particularly well articulated in their artist statements published in conjunction with the 2004 Neuberger Museum installation.²⁰⁹

The *Black Pulse* series of crumbling leaves in various stages of decay, begun in 2000 and continued through 2007, represents Doug and Mike's first foray into digital media, though this body of work came into being with the aid of a scanner rather than photography. While the physical qualities of the subject matter remain

²⁰⁹ ———, *Behind Your Eye*. 1-4.

consistent, this technical advancement is tied to the availability of the new, high quality Lambda digital color printing process of pristine large-scale prints. *Black Pulse*, the Starns' first digital works in color, were first introduced to the public at the Baldwin Gallery in Aspen, Colorado, from November 24 to December 23, 2000.²¹⁰ Small editions of between three to five works range from 17 to 95 inches in either dimension on Gampi paper, a Japanese silk tissue, assembled with Scotch tape in tiled arrangements.

The tree subject of *Structure of Thought* (2001-2007) logically extends the series of senesced leaves by expanding the field of vision from a micro to a macro lens. The qualities of light are at the center of inquiry, though the new approach looks at the physicality of the subject at a structural level as well:

...in almost any culture in the history of the world, light is used as a metaphor for thought, knowledge, intelligence... With this metaphor as our foundation we recognize that a tree grows toward light, of course it uses light in the process of photosynthesis, in part, to remove carbon from the air and, important in our metaphor, carbon is the primary matter of the body of the tree. The carbon atom, in most states, is black. Besides black being the absence of light it is also the complete absorption of light. In fact, in physics terminology, carbon is a 'black body radiator'—perfectly absorbing and capable of perfectly emitting all wavelengths of light. Carbon for us is the representation of the absorption of light (figuratively thought and information). The black silhouette of the tree represents the absorbed light. The structure of thought is a living dendritic accumulation of intersections and layers.²¹¹

The scientific exploration of the carbon atom affirms the brothers' reversal to the monochrome style, after glimpsing color in *Black Pulse* for the first time. Now, black is understood as the absorption of light. In 2004, Doug and Mike Starn produced their first truly large-scale photomurals in the typical style of the early work, but now assembled from inkjet prints rather than developed in the darkroom. The first of three 13 ½-foot collages completed between 2004-2007, *Structure of Thought 7* (Ill. 26), exists in two versions: one a 27" high, framed print collage, and the second a 55-foot long free-standing structure, designed as the entrance gate to the 2004

²¹⁰ The exhibition checklist is archived at "Mike and Doug Starn, Black Pulse," Baldwin Gallery, www.baldwingallery.com/archive/exhibitions/2000/1200/mds_checkl.htm. (Dec. 11, 2011).

²¹¹ ———, "Absorption + Transmission: Artist Notes," (not dated-c. 2005).

exhibition at the Neuberger Museum of Art, the precursor for the South Ferry Station glass mural (Ill. 38).²¹²

²¹² The Neuberger Museum's exhibition checklist lists the screen installation under the title *Structure of Thought 7*.

7. Public Art Process: Integrating Art with Architecture

7.1 Administration

Administrative processes are essentially of a collaborative nature. The complexities of design and construction within an existing, high-demand public transit system are particularly great, because the integration of public art requires coordination with an excavated site that needs to accommodate for continued operation, but at South Ferry Station the entire station was entirely redesigned to accommodate greater safety requirements. Fleming has commented on the necessary collaborative commitment, while cautioning against the potential for friction:

Slowly, programs across the country are making strategic use of infrastructure opportunities, but this requires intense cooperation. Some types of project, such as transportation [...], require a team approach [...]. When engineers, architects, artists, and landscape architects come on board, early coordination is key and is often only possible when mandated by a thoughtful plan. While not all designers like the idea of collaboration, they get used to it once a program has been established.²¹³

The artist selection process represented phase one of the South Ferry Station administrative process (see above). Then, the Starns signed the contract with the MTA specifying the contractual obligations, budget allocations and general framework covering the period between completion of the final design and installation. While the artist selection process had been conducted by Arts for Transit project manager Vel Riberto, her departure from the program led to the hiring of architect Ann Marie Berenovsky as a contractor to oversee implementation of the South Ferry Station public art project.²¹⁴ She served as the main liaison between the MTA and the Starn Studio, where the team of Doug and Mike along with studio director Gaudéricq Robiliard managed the project.²¹⁵

²¹³ Ronald L. Fleming, *The Art of Placemaking: Interpreting Community Through Public Art and Urban Design* (New York, NY: Merrell, 2007). 304.

²¹⁴ Bloodworth, Sandra. "Interview by Christina Lanzl."

²¹⁵ Robiliard's role is recorded, because he produced the official minutes of the meeting on the integration of the fence design. See Gaudéricq Robiliard. "Minutes to File: Integration of Fencing - South Ferry Station." New York, NY: Metropolitan Transit Authority Arts for Transit, July 5, 2005.

According to Sandra Bloodworth, the Arts for Transit champions the artist in its administrative approach. She summarized the relationship with Doug and Mike Starn as “wonderful,”²¹⁶ while the Starn brothers did feel frustrated at times about the prolonged process and complex MTA administrative process with its extensive rules and regulations.²¹⁷ Together and in partnership with the fabricators the project team did master technical requirements and design guidelines, as well as maintenance and safety requirements, within the construction framework.

7.2 Fabrication: Collaboration with Mayer of Munich and Polich Art Works

The initial design guidelines for the South Ferry Subway Station project called for a mural. However, within a few months after winning the competition, the idea to create an artist-designed safety barrier received approval, as well. Finalist Suikang Zhao’s proposal of an artist-designed security barrier served to open the dialog among the selection committee and the MTA administration (see proposal review, chapter 5.4). Since the approved construction budget already included the line item for the fence, the necessary arrangements for the change order could be made between the Arts for Transit team, the MTA construction oversight and budget offices. The administrative team’s commitment to this additional effort toward reaching the necessary agreement, led to a better overall design of the station. This development led to the hiring of two fabricators: Mayer of Munich, an international leader in mosaic and hand-crafted glass, was engaged to produce this aspect of the project, while the local firm Polich Art Works received the contract for the stainless steel fence (see chapter 7.3 for company profiles).

Fabrication Process

MTA documents record that the artist selection was completed in February 2005.²¹⁸ When they received the commission for South Ferry Station, Doug and Mike Starn were provided with the names of several potential fabricators whom

²¹⁶ Bloodworth, Sandra. "Interview by Christina Lanzl."

²¹⁷ Starn, Doug and Mike. "Interview by Christina Lanzl." Mar. 18, 2011.

²¹⁸ Riberto, "Minutes to File: Artist Selection for South Ferry Subway Station." Feb. 14, 2005.

they researched and evaluated.²¹⁹ Mayer of Munich is unique in that it specializes in both mosaic and glass, offering artists a broader range of creative options. With the added benefit of previous MTA commissions completed, a New York office, and local references available, the Starns decided to partner, with Mayer in Munich, Germany. The choice rested on the firm's excellent reputation, its proven attention to detail, and superb facilities, confirmed by Sandra Bloodworth:

The Starns chose Mayer because of their mosaic expertise, but also because they knew that Mayer is a very experienced fabricator. That they work with glass is an optimal second medium that allowed the artists to move into that direction. Both Mayer and the Starns work very similarly in pushing boundaries. The Starns needed an experienced fabricator, because this was their first experience where many hands were involved in making the art. Their process is usually very private.²²⁰

Initially focusing on their charge to create a mosaic mural at South Ferry Station, the fabrication cost of a 250-foot long, floor-to-ceiling mosaic would have exceeded the \$1 million budget. With the ambition to realize their initial proposal and the consent of the MTA's planning team, the Starns began investigating the possibilities of glass, precipitated also by the recently acquired automatic digital glass painting machine for transfer of the large-scale photographs to float glass. Having created large-scale photo collages since their early beginnings, working with glass tiles became a natural extension of Doug and Mike's repertoire. With the support of the team at Mayer of Munich, they endeavored to create their largest artwork yet.

Glass Fabrication

During the fabrication process, Doug and Mike Starn scheduled several stays at the Munich firm to work on the project. They were intensely engaged in developing the float-glass application that would allow the desired absorption, layering and resulting depth of the imagery in the glass tile.

During the process, design adjustments occurred in the layout of the wall murals. The Starn renderings of the station show an overlapping collage of the map and the leaf (Ill. 68), which was redesigned into the single, framed image of the final

²¹⁹ Starn, "Interview by Christina Lanzl." This matches Barbara Bloodworth's statement in her Mar. 17, 2011 interview.

²²⁰ Bloodworth, "Interview by Christina Lanzl."

installation (Ill. 70). The Leaf bracketed a wider wall section, its three pointed tips bracing the corner of the staircase segment. Mike and Doug's contiguous, overlapping design proposes a contemporary layout more akin to graphic design, while the executed work shows a simplified, more traditional gallery art approach with a sequence of centrally located pictures held within defined borders.

The tree sections of the rendering still feature leafy branches, which were eliminated by the duo during fabrication sessions at Mayer of Munich, because they felt the leaves distracted from the structure of the trees (compare Ill. 75-76). However, the bare branches also change the murals' iconographic meaning to a more somber message, a circumstance the brothers acknowledge.²²¹

In the casting process liquefied flat glass coated with the powdered color pigment is floated on a bed of molten tin. This multiple application process offered the solution, because the glass tiles can be painted and fired several times, allowing images to be locked in different layers, thus achieving great visual depth—a quality the Starns were after. After many trials, pigments were applied and fired in up to six layers to achieve a layered impression and saturation of color, or "absorption" in Starn terminology. The multi-layered, "fluid sensation of glass"²²² gave the solidity of the wall an appearance of light-filled effervescence.

Public art fabrication does require close collaboration between fabricator, artist, architect, engineer and the commissioning agency. Synchronizing the technological requirements is key to a successful process and outcome. Of course, safety and durability of the glass installation was also of great concern, particularly to the MTA and its Arts for Transit administration. Michael Mayer "carried out countless tests to realize the vision for a lively, organic impression."²²³ The floor plan (Ill. 69) reveals that the larger glass tiles featuring the leaf in the middle section above the main staircase were thinner. This accommodated the curve and added interest through the variation of the glass size. Since those areas are located above a

²²¹ Starn, "Interview by Christina Lanzl."

²²² Michael Mayer, "Interview by Christina Lanzl," (Munich: Mayer of Munich, Feb. 10, 2011).

²²³ Ibid.

staircase, they are somewhat removed from direct contact with the public and therefore safer from potential damage.

Mayer of Munich's professional network put the team in touch with the Augsburg engineer Henning Morgenroth, who had developed a patented hanging system that absorbed vibration. Utilizing this additional safety measure, reviewed and approved by the MTA, the Starns' large-scale contemporary glass mural became a reality.

Mosaic Fabrication

When the necessary experimentation and testing for the float glass murals was completed, the two mosaics—one of the evolutionary Manhattan settlement map and the other one a tree—were fabricated in phase two (Ill. 71-72). The decision to use natural stone was made, befitting the artists' personal philosophy and color preferences. Throughout their career they have favored a monochromatic palette, sepia and natural or earth tones.

Stone tesserae are light absorbing, creating a counterpoint to the reflecting glass surfaces. The dual nature of the layered map initially presented a challenge. Pushing the boundaries of mosaic technique, the layering with the street grid overlay was achieved by affixing the fine web of the plan to the mosaic surface in a second layer of vinyl. Once the design and the vinyl overlay process were established, Mayer's skilled craftsmen fabricated the mosaic. Because the glass fabrication underwent extensive testing to achieve the layered effect, the Starns made several trips to Munich, where they worked hands-on with the glass group. This affected the timeframe, travel budget and overall cost, leading to a fabrication of the mosaic without the Starns' direct involvement. They did, however, participate in the mosaic installation in fall/winter 2008 (Ill. 73).

Fence Fabrication

In July 2005, the MTA Arts for Transit office convened the artists with MTA station architect Franz Zwolensky to discuss the details of the safety barrier (Ill. 66-67 and 74). In the brief five-month period following the commission, the design team

determined the need to integrate a unique fence design, because it “added a layer to the visual dialogue. The standard fencing became disruptive.”²²⁴ The reconfiguration of the security barrier is an important design adjustment, because it moved the information booth farther east to optimize circulation, which allowed a more unencumbered view of the mural wall.

The Starn Studio subcontracted the fence fabrication to Polich Art Works, a highly respected art foundry with an architectural metals division, and presented their initial fence design together with a material sample, as well as supporting documentation from the fabricator regarding safety, structural resistance and maintenance. The MTA requested redesign and final fence fabricator bids by the end of the summer: “Pending evaluations and findings by Division of Stations and Systems Safety, the Artists will revisit their design to meet requirements as indicated while also keeping the nature of the artistic project and its inspiration based on the trees from the Battery Park above ground. Final bid will have to be provided by the end of August.”²²⁵ At this speed the artists’ goal to perfect their preliminary fence design was curtailed.²²⁶

The New York State building code’s complex requirements include specification of weight loads and the maximum size of openings in fences: “Open guards shall have balusters or ornamental patterns such that a 4-inch-diameter sphere cannot pass through any opening up to a height of 34 inches. From a height of 34 inches to 42 inches above the adjacent walking surfaces, a sphere 8 inches in diameter shall not pass.”²²⁷ Adhering to these necessary safety precautions in the design process with the documentation requirement for the hundreds of openings in the laser-cutting matrix places incredibly high demands on realizing a unique design. These pressures are heightened by the unfortunate reality that agencies, because of complex administration and decision-making structures, at times impose restrictive deadlines.

²²⁴ Bloodworth, "Interview by Christina Lanzl."

²²⁵ Gaudéricq Robiliard, "Minutes to File: Integration of Fencing - South Ferry Station," (New York, NY: Metropolitan Transit Authority Arts for Transit, July 5, 2005).

²²⁶ Starn, "Interview by Christina Lanzl." Beacon, NY: Starn Studio, Mar. 18, 2011.

²²⁷ New York State Building Code, Section 1003.2.12.2. In: ———, "Subject: South Ferry Subway Terminal, Fence Designed by Doug and Mike Starn." 1.

Fabricator Profiles of Mayer of Munich and Polich Artworks

Mayer of Munich prides itself on individualized, handcrafted work and expert consulting services in design and execution. Its highly trained, flexible team is open to experimentation and innovation in a state-of-the-art, 30,000-square-foot facility in the heart of Munich.²²⁸ The workshop specializes in collaborations with artists whose primary medium is not glass, which has given it international prominence. This trend has been persistent in art glass, poignantly observed by Oldknow:

In recent years, artistic ideas coming from design, craft, and fine arts circles have been meeting and intersecting in exciting ways, bringing a renewed energy into the more conservative fields of craft and glass design. But the reality, in most cases, is that glass in art, and especially sculpture, tends to be validated by contemporary art cognoscenti only if it is made by an artist coming to glass from outside the glass world, rather than by an artist for whom glass is a primary material.²²⁹

Although Oldknow writes about studio glass, her statement is valid in that it relates the common valuation that assigns more status to artists/designers than to hands-on makers/fabricators. The Mayer family is keenly aware that trained glass artists are less visible in the contemporary art market and has turned this disadvantage into a virtue by teaming up with leading artists and designers. At the same time, the boundaries and valuation of fine art versus craft continue to blur.

Founded in 1847 by Joseph Gabriel Mayer as the Institute for Christian Art, the workshop is currently owned by the fifth generation of this family business.²³⁰ By the early 20th century, the firm had designed and installed hundreds of church window commissions internationally, many of them for congregations in the United States. A New York City office opened in 1888. The commissioned works

²²⁸ Mayer'sche Hofkunstanstalt GmbH, www.mayersche-hofkunst.de/werkstaette/index.shtml (Jan. 30, 2012).

²²⁹ Tina Oldknow, "Recasting Glass." In: Adriano Berengo, *Glasstress: 53rd International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia*, trans. Brenda Lea Stone (Milano: Charta, 2009). 49.

²³⁰ Launched during a revival of stained glass, its roots are tied to the creation of a national identity, bringing with it the rediscovery of the Gothic with its magnificent glass cycles in German cathedrals and churches. The workshop published its history in the volume: *Franz Mayer of Munich and F.X. Zettler: A Short Historic Survey*, (Munich: Mayer of Munich, n.d.).

were recorded in pattern books, from which new clients would chose their preferred design for particular saints and narratives.²³¹ This practice was standard in all crafts and building trades, but with advancing Modernism, the redefinition of the objet d'art as necessarily unique triggered a reinvention of the firm. Beginning in the 1920s, Mayer of Munich established itself solely as a fabricator.

With a worldwide reputation as a leader in stained glass art, artists and architects became the artistic partners who created the designs for Mayer's commissions. The firm added its mosaic department in 1925 and a float-glass painting department for this emerging technique in the early 1980s. The process fuses ceramic colors with the glass in its molten state. In contemporary hand-made glass, float glass applications are a popular technique for the execution of colorful designs, particularly in architectural contexts. The Starn murals were fabricated in this manner using as many as half a dozen fused, painted layers to produce extraordinary depth.

For the stainless steel fences, Starn subcontracted with Polich Art Works, named Polich Tallix Fine Art Foundry as of 2006. The company is located in Rock Tavern, a small town of the Hudson River valley approximately 90 miles north of New York City. The full-service fine arts foundry offers all services related to stainless steel, bronze, iron, aluminum and silver casting, metal finishing and fabrication, as well as restoration and patina. The workshop prides itself on working at the cutting edge of technology, while producing work of the highest quality.²³² Clients include leading New York artists, such as Jeff Koons, Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Otterness and Rona Pondick.

Founder Dick Polich earned a degree in economics from Yale University in 1954, a business background he shares with Dr. Gabriel Mayer, senior principal of Mayer of Munich. Meeting a Massachusetts Institute of Technology specialist in metals led to Polich's study of science-based metal casting and a Master's degree in metallurgy in

²³¹ I studied the archival pattern books under the guidance of Gabriel Mayer at Mayer of Munich in 2011.

²³² "Our Mission," Polich Tallix Fine Art Foundry, <http://www.polichtallix.com/our-mission/> (Apr. 30, 2012).

1965.²³³ He launched his own workshop in 1968 and Tallix quickly prospered. Growing prominence offered the prospect to work internationally, resulting in Tallix's sale to an international firm, of which Dick Polich became president. He left after disagreements to form Polich in 1995.²³⁴

The Starn's fence fabrication coincided with Polich's reacquisition of the Tallix workshop in nearby Beacon. The newly named Polich Tallix Fine Art Foundry united at the Rock Tavern location, offering the Starns the opportunity to rent the closed Tallix facility for the *Big Bambú* project a few years later, in September 2008.

²³³ Ann Braybrooks, "Casting Giant: Polich Art Works in Rock Tavern," *Chronogram* (Dec. 30, 2006), <http://www.chronogram.com/issue/2006/12/Arts+%26+Culture/Casting-Giant?page=1> (Apr. 30, 2012).

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

8. On Site: *See it split, see it change* at South Ferry Subway Station, 2009

8.1 Description

Against the backdrop of 9/11 and the public sentiment to memorialize, Mike and Doug Starn utilize nature to tell the timeless story of endings and new beginnings. Their leafless tree layers hover between presence and absence, a much-quoted characteristic of the 9/11 Memorial.²³⁵ *See it split, see it change*²³⁶ is packaged as a series of photomurals bracing two mosaic murals at the center (Ill. 75-78). The three central murals, from left to right, feature a glass mural with a single, large desiccated leaf (Ill. 70), a topographic map of Manhattan, and a mosaic of the main station theme—layers of tree branches. Since the staircase is a highly frequented, the use of mosaic offers a better, more durable choice of material in this area.

Entering the station from the street level, a double-set of stairs, along with a set of escalators to the right, give the traveler an immediate, first impression of *See it split, see it change*. Formally, the installation is comprised of two layers: the first one is the artist-designed, stainless steel fence of layered tree branches, and the second one is the undulating wall murals accessed through the ticketing zone (Ill. 81), that lead from the main concourse to the 1 train and the R train to the right from the main concourse.

Architecturally, the *See it split, see it change* concourse siting links the subterranean platforms with Peter Minuit Plaza and the adjacent Staten Island Ferry Terminal above (Ill. 78). Coming from the 1 line train, the work reveals itself as multi-directional, stretching between both ends and reaching down a few feet below the concourse floor, where wedges of imagery greet the traveler along the back walls of the stairwell and escalator. Passing the layered tree branches from left to right, the narrative slowly progresses along the 250-foot-long, floor-to-ceiling art installation

²³⁵ See Harriet Senie, "Absence versus Presence: the 9/11 memorial design," *Sculpture* Vol. 23 No. 4 (May 2004). 11.

²³⁶ The Starns insist on the lower-case spelling of the project title.

along the main vestibule wall, giving the viewer a memorable and immediate, very visceral, first impression.

The artwork simultaneously serves as way-finding tool, offering a sense of place, with the two picture walls above the main staircase at the center of the station pinpointing the point of entry (Ill. 79). Precisely at this node, the two centralized mosaics devoted to circulatory systems indicate the change and choice of direction. A single leaf with exposed veins is placed in a right angle to the tip of Manhattan's topographic and street grid map, both pointing down. The user decides, whether to take the stairs or to continue to the escalator at the end of the concourse, a short walk enhanced by the imagery of a tree grove (Ill. 80).

Zooming in, a mighty tree trunk carrying massive branches rises up towards the left and up to the light alongside the set of escalators at the end of the platform, where the traveler moves between the 1 train terminus and the concourse level (Ill. 75). The major branches form a strong graphic, black-and-white pattern. Webs of small twigs fill the open areas as finely detailed drawings. Continuing past a doorway set inside a niche of standard white tiles, the bounding wall of the main station walkway that separates the fare area from the main vestibule, the next wall segment features a large, diagonally jaggging tree branch reaching down towards the ground, embedded in a web of twigs.

Moving toward the center, the wall curves to the right, where the 1-by-2-foot art tiles are replaced by approximately 4-by-3-foot hand-made, white glass panels featuring the emblematic leaf with exposed veins, intended to recall circulatory systems (Ill. 70). This area faces the fare turnstiles, at the center of the station, where the two mosaic murals offer a first welcome from that direction (Ill. 81). The leaf panel reaches down past the floor-level into the depths of the staircase. Facing it at a right angle, the map at the lower left bears the image credit and artists' signature in small, historicizing typeface: "*STARN BROS. PHOTO-LITHOGRAPHERS WASHINGTON D.C.*", following the lead-in "*THE ORIGINAL TOPOGRAPHY OF MANHATTAN ISLAND / FROM THE BATTERY TO 155TH STREET / Mainly from the surveys of Hills and Randall*" (Ill. 82).

The Roman-style mosaics, edged with a frame-like border of beige tesserae in the manner of traditional paintings, recall the long tradition of mosaic art commissioned for MTA stations. A doorway niche separates the densely packed tree murals on the left from a much different species of airy, more vertically branching deciduous tree. Here the layers of the fused glass provide accentuated views and depth. Due to the milky background of the glass tile, the light seems to be permanently emanating behind these trees. This mural graces the longest uninterrupted wall section, dissected by another door niche. Following that break in sequence, the latticed branches once again are characterized by dense nodes, which correspond to the pronounced tracery at the opposite end.

Exiting the station through the turnstiles, the 250-foot curving mural gallery again becomes visible through a stainless-steel fence that repeats in its own design the tree motif. On either side of the fence, this feature intensifies the experience of the tree grove, expressed in yet another medium. The pictorial duality of wall and fence reinforce the installation as an environment, elevating it from the mere two-dimensional experience of a “gallery” wall (Ill. 74).

Mounted on the right face of a square, two-by-two foot, weight-bearing column behind the MTA service booth, an inconspicuously placed metal sign bears the inscription: “Doug & Mike Starn / See it split, see it change / 2008 / Fused glass, stone mosaic, stainless steel / Fabricated by Franz Mayer of Munich, Inc. and / Polich Tallix, LLC / Commissioned by MTA Arts for Transit and MTA New York City Transit”. Notably, both the glass and fence fabricators are credited in the realization of the work, a rare sight in public art credits.

If the serene beauty of the installation serves to instill a calming presence, unfortunate noise pollution agitates the space creating discomfort. Alarms shriek incessantly at the two exit-doors towards the main concourse for travelers with luggage, baby carriages, or wheelchairs (Ill. 83). Adding to the strain, these safety exits are also used by the general public. Aggravatingly, the frequent alarms compete with voice-activated escalator directions, whining escalator belts, and

monotonous station safety announcements by the NYC Police Department and, last but not least, MTA train information.

8.2 Context, Material and Meaning: See it split, see it change within the MTA Arts for Transit Collection

Glass

Glass implies fragility. A review of the MTA collection reveals that for the first time, the agency commissioned a glass tile mural at South Ferry Station. New achievements in glass manufacturing made glass a less fragile medium. The introduction of a patented installation method at South Ferry station allowed the individual tiles to absorb a certain amount of vibration. Early on in the process, the art project manager's vision for South Ferry Station focused on the introduction of glass for this particular project.²³⁷ All three materials—mosaic, glass tile, and stainless steel—were fabricated using cutting edge technology, connecting the past with the present in a contemporary interpretation. Ceramic or glass mosaic has been the dominant material for subway murals since the founding of the MTA Arts for Transit program in 1980. Faceted glass, either illuminated by daylight on elevated platforms or backlit below ground, adorns a few stations.

The first contemporary public art commission in glass for the MTA Arts for Transit collection was completed for the Westchester Square—East Tremont Avenue station in 1993.²³⁸ Artist Romare Bearden (1911-1988) worked in partnership with fabricators Benoit Gilsoul and Helmut Schmidt, who completed the work after the artist's 1988 death, working from the preparatory studies and notes. (Ill. 84). Brightly colored, irregularly shaped and rectangular glass facets bring a city skyline to life, executed in the form of faceted-glass windows. An elevated subway train emulates the 6 line's movement through tightly quartered neighborhoods and

²³⁷ Bloodworth, "Interview by Christina Lanzl."

²³⁸ The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, the first transit art program established in the U.S., commissioned the earliest large-scale contemporary glass installation in public transportation. The luminous 7-by-112-foot stained glass mural by Gyorgy Kepes, *Blue Sky on the Red Line*, in the Harvard Square Station of Cambridge, Massachusetts, was completed 1985.

high-rise buildings, weaving the three sections of the 6-foot tall triptych together. Created in comparatively modest scale for the Bronx station's head house, the dominant blue hues heavenly illuminate the interior, accentuating the white walls. Completed entirely in primary colors, a few red buildings and yellow accents establish vivid contrasts. Installed at the stair's landing, two single, 3-foot units flank a central, tripartite window to create a focal point for arriving and departing users. The work's richness in detail elevates the simple interior of the station as well as the artistic merit, a characteristic shared with that of the South Ferry Station installation.

Both Bearden and the Starns reference the subway, but the solutions differ: the painterly portrait of the city warranted a moving train as the appropriate image, while the circulatory nature of systems became the conceptual underpinning at South Ferry Station. For an intermodal transit stop, this sophisticated solution is more appropriate, but it also points to the Starns' more intellectually rigorous vitality conjoined with integrative, interdisciplinary methodology of today's networked society. The next, 2001 glass commission at Broadway Junction, Al Loving's (1939-2005) *Brooklyn, New Morning* (Ill. 85), is comprised of 75 faceted glass panels averaging approximately 3 feet in height and width. Minnesota fabricator Willet Hauser cut and faceted the one-inch-thick glass dalles by hand, then set the pieces into a matrix of ¾-inch black epoxy.²³⁹ The colorful glass facets gleam like jewels when illuminated by sunlight. The thickness of the glass and the use of glue, rather than lead, ensures durability, a significant requirement for public art. The key metaphor of Al Loving's cycle is the spiral to symbolize interdependence and interconnectedness, linking Loving's artistic inquiry to the Starn brothers' interests.

²³⁹ A photo documentation of the project is available at "Metropolitan Transportation Authority," Willet Hauser Architectural Glass, http://www.willethauser.com/portfolio/publicart/mta_al_loving.asp. (Jan. 22, 2012). By comparison, the large-scale, glass mosaic *Blue Sky on the Red Line* by Gyorgy Kepes was installed in the Cambridge Harvard Square station in 1985. Vibrations of subway and bus traffic caused unforeseen deterioration that eventually led to removal. Epoxy glue replaced the traditional lead strips of stained glass, because their malleability withstands transit conditions.

These two earlier MTA glass commissions employed safe, proven production methods, whereas Doug and Mike Starn drew on advances in fused glass technique that provided previously unthinkable visual depth and a patented hanging system, enabling the great innovation of an underground application beyond a glass mosaic.

The Starns' enduring pursuit of enlightenment, along with their interest in technology, harmonizes with the iconography of glass. Cast in the Middle East for three to five millennia, glass is one of the earliest artistic media.²⁴⁰ Today, the material's prominence is greater than ever with a wide range of applications. This "age of glass" forms the skylines of modern cities and facilitates communication through fiber optics. The chemistry of glass lacks crystalline order, a quality known in physics as *amorphous solid*, responsible for its sheer endless malleability. Howard Fox, in line with the art historical canon, connotes the medium's "historical and symbolic associations with knowledge, discovery and perception."²⁴¹ In *Glass: Material Matters*, his important survey of contemporary glass, fifteen years in the making, Fox also points out the historical connection with science,²⁴² and the new dominance of glass in architecture beginning with the International Style. The studio glass movement reintroduced glass into architecturally scaled environments, led by icons like Dale Chihuly and his Pilchuck Glass School.²⁴³

Mosaic

The MTA collection's oldest existing works are in mosaic, and the tradition continued with the establishment of Arts for Transit. Glass mosaics make up the

²⁴⁰ The term evolved from the West Germanic word *glasam* (or *glær* meaning 'amber'), adopted in Latin as *glesum* by Tacitus and Pliny. The oldest, monumental glassworks known today are religious commissions, with the earliest preserved example dated after 1130, the cycle of five stained glass windows picturing prophets at Augsburg Cathedral, painted with elements of the Byzantine style. Stained glass windows control how light illuminates the space. The transcendental qualities of glass have inspired both ecclesiastic and secular architecture since its early beginnings, from the soaring stained glass fenestrations of Gothic cathedrals to modern architecture, offering a major record of pictorial art that has survived. The industrial revolution brought technical innovations to glass production and advanced architectural construction methods, but through the centuries, the transparency and the effects of light on the medium continue to be the most alluring qualities.

²⁴¹ Howard Fox, *Glass: Material Matters* (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2006). 95.

²⁴² *Ibid.* 134.

²⁴³ *Ibid.* 143.

majority of the works, with the occasional ceramic or stone mosaic. Wedged between the two wings of the Starns' iconic glass mural, three mosaics form the core of the original proposal in mosaic. Longevity, durability and ease of maintenance guide the Arts for Transit's penchant for the medium. Both Anthony²⁴⁴ and Rossi²⁴⁵ established that the mosaic technique originated four to five millennia ago in Mesopotamia, where the Sumerians endeavored a heritage that stands the test of time.²⁴⁶ These earliest examples were executed in terracotta, while Egyptian tessellations introduced vitreous enamel and glass. The Moguls of India covered their buildings at Agra and Delhi with stone mosaics and in the Americas; the Aztecs embellished masks, shields and other objects with turquoise mosaics.

Differentiated is between *stone* or *Roman style* mosaic and *glass* or *Venetian style* mosaic, depending on the material used. Glass mosaics usually sport brilliant colors and shiny surfaces inherent in the nature of the material. Their importance grew with the rise of Christian art as mosaics began illustrating religious life and dogma in the fourth century. The more historical use of stone stems from the tradition of mosaic pavements and decorative ornament. Matte, light-absorbing surfaces are congruent with the opaque nature of stone.

Doug and Mike Starn's extensive studies on the absorption of light in their photographic work gives them a clear vision for material choices and characteristics. While the South Station glass mural naturally reflects light, the more subtle, absorbent stone mosaic above and adjacent to the 1 line staircase brings a more serene character to the passage between the concourse and the subway platform below. The choice of stone is also congruent with the Starns' penchant for duality: the glass murals reflect light, while the stone mosaics absorb light. Their approach was supported by fabricator Mayer of Munich, an expert in

²⁴⁴ Edgar Anthony, *A History of Mosaics* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1968). 31.

²⁴⁵ Ferdinando Rossi, *Mosaics: A Survey of their History and Techniques* (New York: Praeger, 1970). 13.

²⁴⁶ The word *mosaic* finds its etymological roots in the Latin *musaicum* or the Greek *mouseion*, translated as "mosaic work, work of the muses." The latter is also the origin of the word *museum*. These roots are indicative of the mosaic's important role in cultural delivery. Spanning the centuries of mosaic application, a number of techniques were developed. The Hellenistic and Roman mosaic pavements of antiquity evolved to early Christian wall mosaics.

mosaic with several prior commissions completed for New York's Arts for Transit program, including Samm Kunce's extensive glass mosaics and stone commission at 42nd Street–Bryant Park (Ill. 86).²⁴⁷

Concept and visual language of the Bryant Park project relate to the South Ferry Subway Station. Here, as at South Ferry Station, the narrative envelops the walls of the underground walkway. Akin to the Starns' tree imagery of Battery Park, the theme of nature and systems directly relates to the park above. Samm Kunce visualized the roots of trees, accompanied by bands of text "based on the idea of systems—the city's water system, the system of tree roots and animal tunnels underground, and the system of language, history and knowledge,"²⁴⁸ the latter also referencing nearby New York Public Library. The organic shapes of tree roots are executed in glass mosaic on white ground, while narrow bands of stone tiles in earth tones indicate soil. With the exception of the lines of text, all materials are irregularly shaped to create a dynamically flowing experience. Fabricator for the project was Mayer of Munich who conveys his exceptional abilities in mosaic and cut stone, thereby recommending himself for the next project. The glass mosaic and stone installation *Under Bryant Park* at 42nd Street—Bryant Park station, installed in 2002, is one of the largest works in the MTA collection. It received the 2002 award for Best Public Art project by the New York Municipal Art Society, an impetus for artists, including New Yorkers Doug and Mike Starn, to take note.²⁴⁹ Evident in this public art project is the trend towards holistic environments in a departure from the clearly framed artwork in a single, confined location. The artwork becomes an experience, rather than an image to behold.

Blooming (Ill. 87), renowned painter Elizabeth Murray's glass mosaic of 1996 at Lexington Avenue–59th Street, is an early MTA example of deconstructing the notion of contained images: "The floor-to-ceiling glass-mosaic walls literally escape the confines of the space to wrap around corners, sneak down steps, and ooze through doorways."²⁵⁰ In vibrant colors a steaming coffee cup embraces one of the

²⁴⁷ Mayer, "Interview by Christina Lanzl."

²⁴⁸ Bloodworth, *Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit*. 34.

²⁴⁹ "Artist: Samm Kunce," Metro, <http://www.metro.net/about/art/artists/kunce/>. (Jan. 28, 2012).

²⁵⁰ ———, *Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit*. 44

entryways, swallowing the commuter. A comparison to the Starns' stone mosaics shows that Murray used larger tesserae resulting in a more expressionistic, painterly appearance. This technique would not have translated the detailed imagery Doug and Mike introduced at South Ferry Station. In contrast to the Lexington Avenue–59th Street murals, generous borders of white tessellae suggestive of an art gallery frame the two mosaics at South Ferry Station (Ill. 79). This application deliberately relates tradition, while the neighboring photomurals in glass imply windows to the outside world (Ill. 75-76). The medium of photography reintroduces great detail to the mosaic technique, while simultaneously emphasizing the limitations of its illustrative character next to the fused glass murals with their unprecedented reality and depth. Consequently, South Ferry Station serves as a case study of materials not only within the MTA but the entire field of public art.

Fence

Stainless steel is a steel alloy that contains chromium, making it resistant to rust and tarnishing. The material was developed in the early 1900s and quickly replaced wrought iron, because of its noncorrosive quality, plus a lower price tag, thanks to mass-produced, standardized stock. The Starns' decorative metalwork is the first figurative, stainless steel fencing commissioned by the Arts for Transit program (Ill. 74). Among the MTA's collection of decorative fencing are two functional railings installed at Park Place and 23rd Street stations in 1988 and 1999. Valerie Jaudon's *Long Division* (Ill. 88) is composed of a linear and arched design unit, whose pattern repeats across the length of the security barrier at 23rd Street. This particular project inspired the MTA to commission system-wide, standards for railings, the *Wave* and *Medallion* design elements by artist Laura Bradley.²⁵¹ These designs use standard stock and machining techniques, so they do not transcend the purely decorative. Nevertheless, the warm glow of the station's cream-colored ceramic tile combined with Jaudon's elegant black fence, lend the utilitarian station architecture an upscale ambience. Contrary to the cloistered impression of 23rd Street, the unpainted, polished steel of Doug and Mike's fence is perceived as a parallel layer to the visual vocabulary introduced on the walls. This novel

²⁵¹ Ibid. 60.

production of a contiguous image is made possible by the advance of laser cutting technology, which enables the automated—and thus affordable—production for commercial use.

An alternative to stainless steel is bronze, another noncorrosive material particularly well suited for outdoor environments because of its capacity for casting fine detail, and even greater longevity than stainless steel. Alison Saar's *Hear the Lone Whistle Moan* (Ill. 89-90) displays decorative grilles on triangular insets and two rectangular bronze panels. The large panels depict two relief figures of a woman arriving and a man leaving the city, sited respectively on the inbound and outbound platforms.²⁵² On this elevated outdoor platform, the grilles form the backdrop to a narrative, rather than serving a purpose. Compared to the highly complex profiles and forms of traditional wrought iron, Saar's bronze grille ornaments are simple, giving the appearance of customary stock with the attached, welded figures and a few details, such as a mirror, a fan, or a rooster. Manifold references are contained in the work. On the one hand, the grille as a form infers a retrospective yearning for the decorative qualities of earlier centuries. This unique, individualized design quality, a trait shared with the Starns' fence at South Ferry Station, is being returned to the station in the form of public art. Further, Allison Saar celebrates her African-American heritage, not only in the dark patina of the bronze, but also by pointing to the importance of the railroad as a means of escape during slavery, also metaphorically referring to the secret network of the Underground Railroad.

8.3 Iconography

The Iconography of Trees

Trees are essential to life on earth. Trees as an independent subject in art history are closely tied to the genre of landscape painting. Rooted in antiquity, the landscape painting emerged in the 16th century when artists began to depict

²⁵² Ibid. 72.

landscape paralleling a reawakening interest in nature ignited by the Renaissance. The Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography series offers a volume on the iconography of landscape. The term *tree* has no synonyms, which points to its vital nature. In his “practical symbolism” Davies recognized the connection of the individual to trees and defined the symbolism of trees as follows:

The tree presents itself as a medium of thought in a direct and obvious way through its possession of trunk, roots and branches. Other factors such as type of bark, flower, fruit, and colour all add subsidiary themes, as does the fact that the tree is a habitat for many creatures. It also stands, both literally and metaphorically, as a living entity spanning many human generations. As such, it presents itself as a historical marker and social focus of events.²⁵³

This accurate, broad reading bridges the gamut between prehistoric peoples worshipping trees as sacred objects inhabited by a god and contemporary society. In the Near East, the ancient cult of the earth goddess and associated rites were intended to stimulate the fecundity of crops. A deciduous tree’s seasonal renewal and death symbolized the fertility of the earth.²⁵⁴ The implication of life cycles coincides with the Starns’ philosophy.

In Christian art historical iconography, trees “represent[s] the axis and mystical center of the cosmos and the element of conjunction between the world underground (roots), the earth (trunk), and the celestial dimension (leaves and branches),”²⁵⁵ establishes Matilde Battistini in *Symbols and Allegories in Art*, based on research of master paintings from the Renaissance to Surrealism. While contemporary art historical interpretation of the foliage and branches may be more removed from the heavens, Battistini aptly establishes the connection of belowground, earth and the environs. The earliest references to trees in the Judeo-Christian tradition are found in *Genesis*. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as well as the tree of life grow in the Garden of Eden. Impelluso points out the dialectic between the tree in bloom and the desiccated tree, “indicating the

²⁵³ Douglas Davies: “The Evocative Symbolism of Trees.” In: Dennis Cosgrove; Stephen Daniels, ed. *The Iconography of Landscape* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). 34.

²⁵⁴ James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1979). 307.

²⁵⁵ Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005). 248.

opposition between redemption and sin.”²⁵⁶ The association of sin with the barren-tree silhouettes at South Ferry Station introduces a potent metaphor, because they are based on Doug and Mike’s photographs of New York’s Battery Park and Central Park. The foliage of the source photos was digitally removed to emphasize structure, but the artistic editing process based on formal criteria does not preclude the iconography of sin. Sin here can be understood as a fall from grace, expressed in the September 11 attacks’ vicious cycle of arrogant superiority, destruction and penance.

From the small shoots to the enlarging branches up to the main shaft, the silhouetted tree structures imply hierarchy. Each tree is an independent system, although in progression. Each branch or tree could also be grafted into its own new organism. Mike Starn has referred to *See it split, see it change* as “rhizomatic structure.”²⁵⁷ Although at first a seemingly unorthodox metaphor, the multiple meanings of rhizome lead to an open-ended interpretation. The term is rooted in botany and dendrology, where rhizome commonly refers to plants, which are able to grow anew, if separated into pieces. The French philosophers and collaborators Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari transferred this principle to apprehended multiplicities in their influential monograph *Mille Plateaux (A Thousand Plateaus)*, first published in 1980. Their theory proposed manifold, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in the interpretation of object-based, social, and cultural systems, while referring to the historic tree structure of library classifications as hierarchical and outdated. The comprehension of all life as networks and systems indeed replaced the linear concepts preceding the age of the Internet.

The Starns’ photographic tree imagery, because of its stark contrast of light and the tree structures, offers seamless visual connections between layers of branches on a two-dimensional surface. They thus contradict the argument by Gilles and Deleuze that the tree is a strictly hierarchical construct, because their paradigm is based on illustrations of ‘knowledge trees’ rather than photographs. The twins’ visualization proves that, ultimately, what matters most, is *how* a structure is viewed and

²⁵⁶ Lucia Impelluso, *Nature and its Symbols* (Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004). 16.

²⁵⁷ Brian R. Hubbard, "See It Split, See It Change: Doug and Mike Starn install a rhizomatic tree motif in an NYC subway station," (Mar. 2, 2010).

visually represented, also expressed by the title of the Starns' *Structure of Thought* series.

Within the 250-foot long progression of the tree panels, a single leaf marks the center, across from the turnstiles, with its tip pointing down below to the staircase that leads to the subway platform below. The leaf thus serves as a directional marker, whose effectiveness is further enhanced because it also is the most colorful element of the entire installation. The majority of iconographical dictionaries feature an entry on trees,²⁵⁸ while no references refer to the leaf. From this status quo I deduct that the single leaf has to be understood as an element of the tree, just like its branches and the trunk. The whole represents the single element, while the detail inevitably relates the whole. The Starn series of desiccated leafs does indicate a vanitas motif reflective of the post-September 11 zeitgeist. The execution of the image in the fragile medium of glass particularly emphasizes the fragility of the leaf as it symbolizes the Starns' intended structure of the transportation system, both understood in terms of New York's transit and as a symbol of life.

The Starns' knowledge transfer from trees as systems to the circulatory veins of a leaf, and, finally, to a transportation network, reflects systems thinking. As such, the artists' grasp of the rhizome complements their assiduous and continuing artistic investigation of interconnectedness. One could interpolate that South Ferry Station appears as a physical midpoint in a metaphoric state of limbo based on Doug and Mike's understanding of time and expressed in the structure of the tree imagery:

Though photography generally attempts to fix an image in time, we seek to inject time into our images, for time is a positive force: paradoxically, what endures is change. The silhouetted trees, the desiccated leaf, and the discarded topographies serve as poignant symbols for our journey, because they quietly remind, while we go, from whence we came.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ An exception is Sarah Carr-Gomm, *The Dictionary of Symbols in Western Art* (New York, NY: Facts on File, 1995). See also the follow-up publication: Sarah Carr-Comm, *Hidden Symbols in Art* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 2001).

²⁵⁹ Starn, "Doug and Mike Starn Proposal for South Ferry Terminal Project."

The timeless quality of the Starn proposal strikes the delicate balance between natural and man-made processes and systems, while introducing a dignified transcendence that is reflective of and appropriate for post-9/11 American society.

The Map

Maps, according to Schlögel, are not only a passive recording locked into the time of their production, but also reflect prevalent power structure and ambitions. They may signify the end of an era or introduce the dawn of a new age.²⁶⁰ In this regard, the Starns' layering of maps from pre-European entry to the modern settlement of Manhattan offers political commentary, in addition to recognizing the change of *place* over time. Indeed, the proposed mapping effort can be viewed as entirely congruent with Schlögel's understanding of cartography, while simultaneously complementing the Starns' underlying theme of change.

Maps necessarily have to be associated with systems and the notion of abstraction of information. Maps in themselves are both documentation and symbols describing our world ranging from minute microscopic charting to outer space. Maps are recordings, drawings, renderings, representations or diagrams that bridge the gap between science and art. As such, they have found widespread use in contemporary art. At South Ferry Station, Manhattan's topography of pre-European settlement offered with an overlay of a late 19th century census street grid documents not only the changing character of the peninsula, but also the history of mapping as an imposition of new order. Further, the ancient technique of the stone mosaic links the Roman Empire to the history of colonialism in the New World. The complexity of Doug and Mike Starn's *See it split, see it change* continues to unravel and produces new layers and associations time and again, as the viewer traverses South Ferry Station.

While any obvious political references are absent from *See it split, see it change*, the visual language offers fertile ground for awareness and critical reflection on the current condition specific to the site and the world at large. Permanent public art is typically intended to stand the test of time for generations. The Starns demonstrate

²⁶⁰ Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit*. 89.

an understanding of a need for legacy and offer complex, inspired thought that holds meaning, weight and longevity, rather than a one-note representation of a moment in time.

9. Art in the Community: *From One, Two; and From Two, One at Aspen Institute, 2008*

9.1 Project Background: Conference on Tibetan Arts and Culture

A nationally recognized convener and think tank of brilliant minds, the Aspen Institute is an international nonprofit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. Educational programs are hosted on two campuses, one in Maryland on the Chesapeake Bay, and one in the picturesque Rocky Mountain town of Aspen, Colorado, which gave the institute its name. Its “mission is twofold: to foster values-based leadership, encouraging individuals to reflect on the ideals and ideas that define a good society, and to provide a neutral and balanced venue for discussing and acting on critical issues.”²⁶¹

In a joint venture with the Conservancy for Tibetan Art and Culture, the symposium *A Celebration of Culture* was produced July 24-26, 2008, championing Tibetan and Himalayan art, culture, science, medicine, spiritual practice and history. The three-day international conference convened important scholars, professionals and leaders on a platform that was intended to illuminate the global impact of Tibetan thought and present-day cultures.

As a country, Tibet has been faced with political and cultural obliteration following Chinese occupation in 1950 and annexation in 1951. Only a dozen of over 6,000 monasteries survived destruction in the 1960s and 1970s. Subsequently, Buddhist literature, religious paintings and artifacts dating back a thousand years have been offered for sale on the international market, seen as a Chinese effort to raise foreign currency and to eradicate Tibet's cultural heritage. Tibetans today are a minority in their country, with over one million more Chinese than Tibetans estimated to live there. This massive population shift strengthens China's territorial claims over Tibet. A 1987 peace plan for Tibet introduced by the Dalai Lama at a meeting of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in Washington requested that Tibet should be

²⁶¹ "The Aspen Institute Mission Statement," Aspen Institute, <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/about>. (Feb. 4, 2012).

given the status of a “peace zone” and demanded self-determination for the Tibetan people in their own country. In May 1991 the United States Senate passed a resolution declaring Tibet an occupied country whose true representatives are the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government in Exile, followed by a Human Rights declaration by the German Parliament in June 1996. The Tibetan struggle for recognition is ongoing.

The Institute invited Tibet’s spiritual leader, his Holiness the Dalai Lama, as keynote speaker. Event co-chair Margot Pritzker, a long-time personal friend of the Dalai Lama, praised him in her opening remarks

for embodying the ideal of values-based leadership—the core principle of the Institute’s mission—and urged attendees to ‘savor the connection between our aspirations and the reality of his example. We have so much to learn from those rare individuals whose lives are thoroughly consonant with the values they profess.²⁶²

These observations are also true for Doug and Mike Starn, who embody a deeply spiritual valor in their life and work. As artists, they have always followed their own path, while their unassuming, generous temperament distinguishes them as people.

The extraordinary occasion of the Dalai Lama’s visit and address, along with Himalayan cultural performances on the Institute’s Benedict Music Tent stage, called for a welcoming setting and festival atmosphere. In partnership with Anderson Ranch Arts Center, a nationally recognized, cultural and artist-in-residence program situated in the nearby town of Snowmass, the artist duo was invited to spearhead this effort.²⁶³

Doug and Mike’s previous, earnest engagement with Buddhist culture and lifelong artistic inquiry at the intersection of Eastern and Western thought made them an ideal choice. In 2000, the brothers had followed an invitation to travel to Nara, a Buddhist center and world heritage site in central Japan, where they photographed

²⁶² Excerpts of Margot Pritzker’s speech are quoted in: Kate [et al.] Bailey, “Lessons from Tibet,” *The Aspen Idea* Winter 2008/09. 43.

²⁶³ *Ibid.* 47.

the life-size portrait sculptures of legendary monks Ganjin and Gyoki. In addition, the artists had built a local following through their representation by Aspen's Baldwin Gallery. In their 2006 solo exhibition, *allevythingthat isyou*, Doug and Mike had introduced Aspen's cultural community and collectors to the new series of snow crystals, with their first shows dating back to 1998 (*Blot out the Sun*) and 2000 (*Black Pulse*). As recognized artists with an affiliation to Buddhism, their association with the Aspen Institute's conference on Tibetan arts and culture indeed signified a cohesive vision.

9.2 Site and Project Context

The Aspen Institute's white Benedict Music Tent stage architecture is designed as an open-air structure, whose natural wood seating and stage are protected from the elements. The dominant feature of the stage is the rear wall, with light and dark bands of wood. The Starns chose to contrast this stark geometry with a colorful narrative (Ill. 93-97) that befitted the bright Himalayan costumes of the performers (Ill. 96-97) and offered the necessary contrast for speakers in business attire. The backdrop on the main stage, a half moon circle of fabric, spanned the color spectrum from white to red. Origami snowflakes of many shapes and sizes enlivened this colorful envelope and tied it together visually. Incorporating prayer flags was a brilliant use of a commonly recognized Tibetan and Buddhist cultural icon. The prayer flags offered a whimsical counterpart to the hanging of both the American flag and the Tibetan flags, which set the tone of an official state visit, formalized by the appearance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, indicating the political subtext.

The artists' floating cloud concept with the blanket of falling snow below produced an exuberant, colorful whole, while granting maximum freedom to the children's creative choices. Apt for people of all ages, this simple yet effective image of nature made the theme particularly accessible to children, even if its onstage symbolism was not entirely obvious to the uninitiated. All the same, the prayer flags swept across the space in colorful, dynamic lines. The majority of the designs were hand

printed as easily identifiable, geometric, or organic shapes in black on the colorful array of square flags (Ill. 93-94). As such, they appeared more refined than typical children's art. Recurring, recognizable imagery featured the sun. These individual paintings of the sun received special recognition as exhibits pinned to the rear curtain, also referencing the brothers' sun-inspired phase of the 1990s. Bringing snowflake imagery to the high Rocky Mountains also established the geographic connection between the mountain location of both Tibet and Colorado. The snowflakes invoked magic and impermanence, a topic the artists are as knowledgeable about as the teachers due to their intense artistic investigation. Doug and Mike themselves describe *From One, Two; and From Two, One* as a

colorful cloud comprised of 2000 prayer flags handmade by local kids in a common prayer/wish for peace, love and understanding. This mass of flags is unlike a normal display of children's art, in that the artworks are not meant to be seen individually. It is the interconnected whole, it's the presence of all of the wonderful and beautiful thoughts and intentions joined together that makes the difference to the artwork/cloud; just as it is all the individual efforts together towards peace that surely make the difference to the world. [...]Below the cloud is a snowfall of unique and individual snowflakes created by the kids. Cliché as it is, every real snowflake is a unique, beautiful, ephemeral, a minute and unlikely architecture, so delicate they are barely more than an idea. But in accumulation of staggering and immeasurable amounts create glaciers, leading to the realization that the improbable is possible when all come together.²⁶⁴

This characterization reaffirms the principles of duality in their practice and their spiritual approach. Immersing oneself in culture and art forms a solid base for persistent pursuit, while offering a platform to share these thoughts with the world. The project for the Aspen Institute also entailed a public endorsement of Buddhist philosophy by the Starns in a clarity previously unknown. Art and science are harmoniously integrated to establish dialogue. The brothers' lifetime experience as collaborating twins shapes insights contained in Buddhist theory and a creative philosophy of equanimity, a much needed quality in a post-9/11 world.

²⁶⁴ "From One, Two; and From Two, One," Starn Studio, www.starnstudio.com/Dalai_Lama.html. (Feb. 10, 2012). The exact number of individual flags is unclear. Bailey wrote of 1,200 flags.

9.3 Work Relevant for the Aspen Institute Project

The Buddhist Path to Enlightenment: *Ganjin and Gyoki*

The Dalai Lama and his teachings enjoy an avid following in the United States and in the Western world. His devotees embrace the Buddhist philosophy of peace and non-violence gained through meditative self-reflection on a life-journey of seeking insight. The Starns write about their interaction with Buddhism:

The Starns' engagement with Buddhist principles takes many forms, both concrete and abstract. It is present in their photographs of the eighth-century Buddhist monk Ganjin, the archetypal blind seer; it flows through their images of trees and their discarded leaves, symbols of birth and rebirth; and it extends to their unique photographic treatments, in which the passage of time is built in and wholes are made up only by parts.²⁶⁵

Doug and Mike's immersion in Buddhism began with an invitation to photograph a masterpiece from art history. Their past contemporary reinterpretations of art historical icons led to an invitation to photograph at an unusual site: the Buddhist center at Nara, where a statue of the highly revered, blind monk Ganjin (688-763) is housed in the Toshodaiji temple. In 2000, the duo traveled to Japan to shoot the life-size, dry-lacquered clay sculpture made shortly after Ganjin's death (Ill. 33-35). A revered eighth century Buddhist reformer, the likeness is on public view only once a year, on his birthday. The impetus for the photo sessions was impending restorations that would close the temple for ten years.²⁶⁶ Ganjin's biography portrays him as highly determined to accept an invitation by an emissary to lecture in Japan. His fifth failed attempt to travel there from his native China resulted in a three-year odyssey, during which an eye infection left him blind. In 754, Ganjin finally arrived at Nara, where he lived until his death in 763. During his final years he received an imperial land grant allowing him to establish the Toshodaiji temple and a school.

²⁶⁵ "From One Two; and from Two, One. Starn Studio," www.starnstudio.com/Dalai_Lama.html. (Feb. 10, 2012).

²⁶⁶ "Mike and Doug Starn," *Nomenus Quarterly* Issue 2 (Nov. 2007). n.p. – Please note that the interviewer is identified as *Nomenus Quarterly*, while responses by Doug and Mike Starn are marked *Speaker One* and *Speaker Two*, as requested by the interviewees. This stylistic decision and a two-column layout offer unique insights into the collaborative gestation of the pair's thinking and speaking patterns.

Mason classifies the *Ganjin* sculpture as belonging to the late Nara period, which marks the transition from graceful realism to more abstract representation.²⁶⁷ *Ganjin* is identified as the earliest example of true portrait sculpture, due to the fact that the work clearly depicts a blind monk sitting cross-legged with hands folded in meditation, the garment gracefully draping the body. The object was created around Ganjin's death and is housed in the founder's hall at Toshodaiji temple. The lacquered surface establishes strong chromatic contrasts between the bright red, brocaded fabric texture and the skin tones. To Mike and Doug the most remarkable characteristic showed in the statue's face:

Over the centuries much of the gold leaf on the raised and prominent features had worn away, exposing the dark clay underneath, leaving a brilliance only in the recesses and shaded areas. This creates an odd negative appearance, a coincidence of opposites – darkness in the light and light in the dark. Ganjin's eyes see nothing but black, filled with light.²⁶⁸

The medium of film, and particularly in black-and-white photography, clearly reveals this reversal of light and shadow, between positive and negative, adding a new dimension to the discourse on the sculpture. The brothers produced the evidence of this phenomenon by printing two versions of the head, using the film negative for one (Ill. 34), and the positive for the other print (Ill. 35). The black-and-white medium appends additional mystery and age to Ganjin and lends itself particularly well to the depiction of light and dark.

Usually, illustrations of Ganjin in art history surveys show the sculpture in three-quarter profile,²⁶⁹ because this classic mode of photo documentation offers the most inclusive view. This angle conveys the smiling expression of a serene, ethereal personality turning inward, further emphasized by the closed lids. In stark contrast, the Starns opted for a straight frontal perspective, slightly looking up at the figure. This creates an overwhelming effect of monumental presence and power, intensified by the sheer size of the extremely large 22-by-22-foot, tiled

²⁶⁷ Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004). 94-95.

²⁶⁸ Declerck, "Absorption of Light." n.p.

²⁶⁹ For example, see illustration 119: *The Priest Ganjin*, in the mieido (founder's hall), Toshidaiji, 763. Dry lacquer with paint; height: 31 ³/₄ inches. In: Mason, *History of Japanese Art*. 95.

Starn photograph (Ill. 33). The downturned corners of the mouth combined with the strongly accentuated cheeks bestow an appearance of somber authority, strengthened further by the intense chiaroscuro lighting. Consequently, the original, life-size sculpture materializes as a disproportionately enlarged personality of extraordinary presence.

The Starns, by newly interpreting Ganjin through the medium of photography, infuse new meaning into this centuries-old work of art. The vision determines the outcome, requiring the analyst to be aware of the dialectic relationship between original and photographic re-interpretation. With the *Toshodaiji* series, the brothers reveled in the luxury of unrestricted access to the art, discovering the works close-up, while bringing exceedingly rare objects into public view: "And we've always liked to photograph objects from art history, paintings or sculptures, and this was a really exciting opportunity to shoot inside a Buddhist monastery. They're usually pretty hard to get permission from."²⁷⁰ By comparison, as young tourists at the Louvre without privileges, Doug and Mike made the decision to prominently feature the safety enclosure with their own reflection in *Double Self Portrait with Mona Lisa* (Ill. 15), offering proof of their presence, while elevating themselves to *acteurs* at this special location. Likely experienced by most as a hindrance, their vision gave new meaning to the contextual environment, pointing out both the small scale of the DaVinci painting and the visitor perspective in a secured museum space. The mature artists' *Toshodaiji* series, complementing also the religious context, pushes the object into the foreground for an up-close, powerful visual and spiritual experience.

Doug and Mike photographed several sculptures at Nara. Besides Ganjin, Gyoki (Ill. 36) is the most prominent monk in the history of the Nara complex. Gyoki is referred to as Bhodhisattva, an enlightened person on a path to full Buddhahood who chooses to stay in the world to relieve the sufferings of others. Gyoki (668-749) lived at Nara from the age of 15, but left the temple to be active mainly outside the official monastic institutions. Eventually arrested, because he was perceived as an uncontrolled spiritual power by the imperial court, he received pardon and

²⁷⁰ "Mike and Doug Starn." *Nomenus Quarterly*. n.p.

followed the emperor's invitation to assist in raising funds for the planned Great Buddha statue at Nara. The successful conclusion of this endeavor resulted in the casting and installation of the 52-foot-tall bronze Daibutsu in the Todaiji temple (the largest wooden building in the world), erected in the belief that it would protect Japan from catastrophes ranging from natural disasters to invasions.

The Gyoki sculpture has the stylistic characteristics of an animated portrait with the distinguishing facial expression of an inverted u-shaped brow.²⁷¹ Created in 1249 on the 500th anniversary of his death, it is based on earlier depictions. Gyoki holds a scepter to symbolize his authority. Gyoki, like Ganjin, is housed in the Toshodaiji Temple. Stylistically, the two portraits reflect the change from abstracted form to expressive portraiture that captures each monk's determination in his intent look. Summing up their experiences at Nara, Doug and Mike Starn concluded: "After photographing Ganjin, we found out a lot of the philosophies that guide our work [...] are actually paralleled in Buddhism."²⁷²

Work on the *Toshodaiji* series continued until 2008, the year of the Dalai Lama's visit to Aspen. The year 2008 indeed was a very productive year, marking the completion of several large-scale installations in addition to the stage design at the Aspen Institute—the Philadelphia *Gravity of Light* installation, the first construction of *Big Bambú* at the Beacon studio, and installation of the fence, glass and mosaic murals at South Ferry Subway Station, while the in-house production of the *Absorption and Transmission* portfolio cycles paralleled the installations.

Snow Crystals

The prayer flag installation at the Aspen Institute's stage utilized the image of snow crystals for the Aspen stage scheme, drawn from the ongoing series of *Snow Crystals*, which were first presented to the public by Castelli Gallery in 2005 (Ill. 91). From a technical view, the photography of snowflakes is exceedingly difficult, not only because they are extremely small, but also because they are highly ephemeral. The first photographer to master this challenge was the autodidact

²⁷¹ Matthew Welch, "The Art of Asia," Minneapolis Institute of Arts, <http://www.artsmia.org/viewer/detail.php?v=2&id=4867>. (Feb. 24, 2012).

²⁷² "Mike and Doug Starn." *Nomenus Quarterly*. n.p.

Wilson A. Bentley (1865-1931), a Vermont farmer who photographed over 5,000 detailed snowflakes in the late 19th century, proving that none looked alike. Nicknamed *Snowflake Bentley* during his lifetime, he photographed snowflakes under a microscope. His first snow crystal was recorded in 1885 when he was able to successfully connect a microscope to his camera. Throughout his lifetime he sold his photographs to academic institutions and scientific magazines. In 1931, he crowned his work with the publication of *Snow Crystals*, which catalogued over 2,400 images.²⁷³ This kind of scientific, passionate obsession with a singular object is also evident in the Starns' serial approach to photography.

Like Bentley, Doug and Mike experimented several years to develop the photographic process. Bentley's black-and-white photos measured several inches, but the Starns had always challenged themselves with the creation of large-scale work. Once again, the advancement of digital printing technology had reached a plateau that allowed visual artists to achieve crisp prints at previously unprecedented scales. The duo revealed process and context of their snow crystals series within their oeuvre in the extensive interview published by *Nomenus Quarterly*. At the outset, they admit the intense development phase that preceded workable results: "Well, I think it took us five years before we got a real body of work out of this, we spent three years just experimenting and building the camera that would actually work for us. Snowflakes are very, very delicate and small, of course."²⁷⁴ Their study honed in on the chemical propensities of snow crystals in all stages. Snowflakes begin as liquid vapor in the atmosphere, but climatic conditions transform them into crystalline structures that attach to the six-sided water molecule. In the process, the brothers once again discover the notion of twinship:

As they're in the cloud, you know, with more molecules of super-cooled water vapor attaching to it and growing out in this shape—actually, that's something, that no one understands. You know, other than the fact that the crystal grows out from the six sides of the molecule, what is unknown still is why they grow symmetrically, and like a mirror. [Speaker One:] Occasionally, you get three sides that are identical and three sides that are different; they're identical, too—you get two pairs of identical branches.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ William A. Bentley. *Snow Crystals*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1931.

²⁷⁴ "Mike and Doug Starn." *Nomenus Quarterly*. n.p.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

The physical qualities contain the spiritual message. Because of their delicacy snowflakes are synonymous with being ephemeral, closely followed by the innocence of white snow. Snow and cold are closely associated, which can lead to death, as narrated in the Japanese fairy tale *Snowblanket* (Ill. 92).²⁷⁶ The Starns laid out the text of the story around a central, asymmetrical snowflake, telling the sad demise of a poor family of four. Two children lose first their father and then their mother, leaving them to fend for themselves. They sell all possessions to feed themselves and are then chased from their home and hide behind this hut, where a "beautiful" blanket of snow slowly covers the dying children. This tale can be interpreted as one momentary glimpse of society or an experience, paralleled and succeeded by countless other moments, which led to the title of the series, *allevythingthatisyu*:

For us, the snowflakes represent all the fleeting moments, all those, all these things that have happened to you only, as an individual, and only to you. And these snowflakes--, [*Speaker One*:] are all the little moments of your life that make up you, and you alone. [*Speaker Two*:] and they're, some of them are broken, but they're all unique and beautiful. [*Speaker One*:] These moments build up into who we are [...], a lifetime of memory, hopes, joys, disappointments and losses, your happiness, your pride, and inadequacies. All these are pieces of everyone. The group is titled 'allevythingthatisyu.'²⁷⁷

Initial experiments photographing snow were conducted outside their studio using a Polaroid camera they had loaded with negative film, a technique the brothers had developed while shooting their *Attracted to Light* series. Their breath, however, melted the flakes too fast. From a garden hose they fashioned impromptu snorkels, which produced only dissatisfying results. They saw enough to realize their need for microscopic lenses, which they borrowed and attached to a Sinar P2 four-by-five camera. The combination of the large-format camera and microscopic lenses gave them the freedom to begin setting up the photo shoot in a controlled environment. The last question was to resolve lighting:

²⁷⁶ Doug and Mike Starn, *allevythingthatisyu* (Stockholm: Wetterling Gallery, 2007). 31.

²⁷⁷ "Mike and Doug Starn." *Nomenus Quarterly*. n.p.

What we ended up using were these tiny, tiny Kinoflos, these miniature fluorescent tubes, but even they give off a bit of heat, and we sort of made a blanket of cold air around those by packing the ends of the fluorescent tubes with--, [Speaker Two:] something called Techni-Ice, this synthetic material can be frozen down to dry ice temperature, which is 190 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, and then it stays that cold for hours and hours. So this-- [Speaker One:] We had tried dry ice initially, but that off-gassed, of course, and just gave us a fog that we couldn't really shoot through. [Speaker One:] And we're able to manipulate the lights. The lights are on articulated arms above and below the glass slide that the snowflakes are sitting on.²⁷⁸

Having resolved all the technical difficulties, the brothers traveled to upstate Vermont and New York in the winter, where they collected the snow for their photography sessions, as reported by Kennedy.²⁷⁹

Leo Castelli Gallery exhibited the Starns' first *Snow Crystal (Study I)* (Ill. 91) in the 2005 solo exhibition *Impermanence*. The title evokes many associations, reflected in all aspects of the show, from the choice of works shown, to the artistic evolution over time, and also as a meditation on Buddhist philosophy and on the masterpieces of art brought back to life by the Starns. The ultimate exploration of impermanence, however, must be seen in the microphotography of individual snowflakes.

Megan Heuer surveyed the Castelli exhibition as a "mini-retrospective of five of the Starns' photo constructions,"²⁸⁰ because the featured works spanned the years between 1989 and 2005, showing the development from the early photo collages of Renaissance paintings to the most recent series of Buddhist statues and the new snow crystals. Unusual for a Starn exhibition in New York, not only was Heuer the sole reviewer, but she offered the new work a cool reception: "*Snow Crystal (Study I)*, 2005, from a series of recent blow-ups of individual snowflakes, is a four-foot square image of a single ice-crystal. Although these photographs of snow lack the physical presence and melancholy of the other works, their scale imparts remarkable weight and substance to one of the most ephemeral structures of

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Randy Kennedy, "In the Garage, with Heat, Light and Snowflakes," *New York Times*, Sept. 2, 2007. 18.

²⁸⁰ Megan Heuer, "Doug & Mike Starn – Leo Castelli," *ARTnews* Vol. 105 Issue 2 (Feb. 2006). 134.

all.”²⁸¹ Scale, as always, is a prominent characteristic, while a single snow crystal photograph precluded observation of the imagery’s inherent variations and potential for serialization typical for the Starn approach.

None of the works mentioned in Heuer’s review receive attention beyond a mere description. Perhaps, the critic lacked insight into the works’ technical bravery or the time to delve deeper. Unusual indeed is the gallery’s choice to show five works representing a 16-year period, while the standard solo exhibition usually focuses on a single body of work, allowing writers to zoom in on a cohesive whole. Consequently, this grouping may have appeared disjointed.

The following year, the *allevythingthatisyoun* series was introduced by the Baldwin Gallery in Aspen, Colorado, which had been representing the Starns since 1998 (*Blot out the Sun; Black Pulse*, 2000).²⁸² The gallery’s location in the Rocky Mountains made it an excellent venue for the subject of snow. Stockholm’s Wetterling Gallery exhibited the series in 2007 and produced an accompanying catalogue with text by Andy Grundberg who, in line with the Starns’ own statements, reaffirmed the iconography of continuous change in the snow crystal photomicrographs: “Here is material evidence of the Starns’ interest in the phenomenological character of the natural world, cast into being against the certitude of our own impermanence,”²⁸³ a response shared by Kennedy²⁸⁴ and Holago.²⁸⁵

9.4 Engaging Community in the Creative Process

At Aspen Doug and Mike worked on a participatory art project for the first time. It engaged several hundred children in the artmaking process, thus taking part in the

²⁸¹ Ibid. 136.

²⁸² Of note is the exhibition title with its brazenly long, compound noun. This is the first instance of the duo’s disregard for spelling rules, perhaps brought about by their exposure to European languages and the new use of language in the internet age, but also indicative of the artists’ attention to conveying meaning through titles.

²⁸³ Starn, *allevythingthatisyoun*. 6.

²⁸⁴ Kennedy, "In the Garage, with Heat, Light and Snowflakes."

²⁸⁵ Ülkü Holago, "De lyckas fanga stjärnorna," *Svenska Dagbladet*, Mar. 7, 2007. 5.

growing field of community art. Beginning with the progressive social justice movement of the 1960s, community art's informal and popular educative approach has been evolving art practice and subject of critical discourse. A variety of alternate terms have been used in the art historical canon, with community arts being the most common term. Susanne Lacy coined *new genre public art*,²⁸⁶ while Arlene Goldbard introduced *community cultural development*,²⁸⁷ reflecting the emerging understanding of individual artist and art genres within the larger context of culture. Both Goldbard and Lacy describe the social agenda as being inextricably linked to community-based art. Goldbard defines "community cultural development" as "the work of artist-organizers and other community members collaborating to express identity, concerns and aspirations through the arts and communications media. It is a process that simultaneously builds individual mastery and collective cultural capacity, while contributing to positive social change."²⁸⁸ Published in 1995, Lacy's influential compilation includes essays by important thought leaders on the arts in community, such as Suzi Gablik, Mary Jane Jacob, Arlene Raven, Alan Kaprov, and others. Lacy's major activist, interactive performances of the 1970s and 1980s involved hundreds of participants. Working in this artform provided her with well-considered insights on public, participatory art that engages and is relevant to communities:

Dealing with the most profound issues of our time [...] a group of visual artists has developed distinct models for an art whose public strategies of engagement are an important part of its aesthetic language. [...] We might describe this as 'new genre public art' to distinguish it in both form and intention from what has been called 'public art'—a term used for the past twenty-five years to describe sculpture and installations sited in public places. Unlike much of what has heretofore been called public art, new genre public art—visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives—is based on engagement.²⁸⁹

While the term "new genre public art" has not found traction in the field, Lacy established awareness and understanding of hitherto hidden and undervalued

²⁸⁶ Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. 1995.

²⁸⁷ Arlene Goldbard, *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development* (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2006).

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 20.

²⁸⁹ Susanne Lacy, "Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys." In: Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. 19.

community-based art, which can but does not necessarily take the form of public art, such as strictly “classroom-based” initiatives or projects in the private realm. In contrast to both Goldbard and Lacy, I employ *public art* as the overarching term for the genre, while community based art and cultural development remain separate domains, both relevant to public art, if related to the creation of art for the public, at publicly accessible or visible sites.

In the 1960s Alan Kaprov was one of the first artists working with community through his *Project Other Ways*, which fostered school children of Berkeley, California, through informal, after-school artmaking in collaboration with public schools with high minority populations.²⁹⁰ One of Lacy’s featured contributors to *Mapping the Terrain*, Kaprov’s model or versions of it, are now replicated in school systems around the globe, and supported by state arts council funding throughout the United States. Community arts centers like the Anderson Ranch Arts Center are essential allies in promoting and implementing interactive and participatory artmaking at the grassroots level. Community engagement, of course, is also an important component of public art, serving the development of community life and cultural assets. In realizing the Aspen stage design, the community, under the guidance of the artists and within a set framework, defined its local identity and shared it with the world.

9.5 The Stars as Stage Designers

The temporal nature of *From One, Two; and From Two, One*, combined with the participatory and community aspects, as well as the project’s function as a stage set, places *From One, Two; and From Two, One* at the intersection of several art genres. On the one hand, its nature and context are performative, while the public nature of the event also denotes the public art character.

The tradition of visual artists’ innovation in modern stage design has been established through the first Cubist sets and costumes created by Picasso for the

²⁹⁰ Alan Kaprov, “Success and Failure when Art Changes.” In: *ibid.* 152-158.

Ballet Russes in 1917, or the 1976 collaboration by Robert Wilson and Phillip Glass on the production of the first minimalist opera, *Einstein on the Beach*.

Choreographer Merce Cunningham was known for his frequent collaborations with architects, designers, musicians and visual artists, including Bruce Nauman and Robert Rauschenberg. The interdisciplinary nature of these stage productions differ from the Starns' Aspen Institute commission, because they were the result of a direct communication between artistic disciplines, whereas the Starns worked with children as collaborative partners. As such, this commission does innovate contemporary stage design in that it elevates participatory community art to the realm of high art because of contemporary artists' leadership in an unprecedented constellation, while keeping in mind that this stage was not designed for an artistic performance.

While Doug and Mike's work is primarily studio-based, their known flexibility and openness to experimentation, combined with a project-driven, conceptual approach, progressively leads them to explore new avenues. At Aspen, the duo's past subject matter and engagement with the town as well as with Buddhism opened new, fruitful ways to interact with community to explore collaborative stage design. The iconic status of the Dalai Lama galvanized singular support and interest.²⁹¹ Through the Institute's coordination, the symposium not only convened an international speaker and participant group, but also connected the local community.

Area organizations and residents became broadly engaged in the symposium's public events and performances. The Dalai Lama's love of children is a well-known fact, inspiring the planning team to engage children in the project, and the impetus came from the Anderson Arts Center: "The project emerged out of a conversation between Anderson Ranch president Hunter O'Hanian and Kitty Boone, director of public programs at the Aspen Institute. After hearing Boone comment that the Dalai Lama enjoyed being surrounded by children's artwork, O'Hanian decided that His Holiness's visit might provide an opportunity for a community arts

²⁹¹ Case in point for the Dalai Lama's extraordinary status is the Winter 2008/09 cover of *The Aspen Idea*, where former president Jimmy Carter and Condoleezza Rice, current Secretary of State, appear as the subsidiary feature stories. See *The Aspen Idea*, Winter 2008/09.

collaboration in the Roaring Fork Valley.”²⁹² Anderson Ranch Arts Center established a national context by engaging Doug and Mike Starn to create the concept and oversee the installation. The plan to install Tibetan prayer flags developed in a natural extension of this widely recognized symbol synonymous with the culture, which also lends itself to community art. Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags have entered popular culture throughout the Western hemisphere as symbol for good luck, prosperity, happiness and longevity. Traditionally printed on silk with a canon of specific symbols, in Tibet the flags are typically strung in long lines paralleling mountain paths, fading and disintegrating, with new flags replacing old ones over time. The Starns described the project:

The kid’s visions are underscored and intermixed with photomicrographs of the unique crystal formations of actual snowflakes photographed by the Starns. Each flake starts as a frozen molecule of H₂O with six sides, they each grow differently simply because as they move around in the clouds collecting more frozen water vapor each one is occupying a different microscopic environment than every other burgeoning flake. [...] In the Buddhist tradition and in the Starns’ world, art and science are not in argument; both seek to understand life and the nature of perception. Ultimately, what their work seeks to both personify and provoke is a state of mindfulness in which opposites such as light and dark, or same and different, are not held in a tense equilibrium but rather in dynamic counterpoise.²⁹³

To create the silk prayer flags, children’s program and outreach coordinator at Anderson Ranch helped enlist three other local arts organizations, the Carbondale Council on the Arts and Humanities, the Glenwood Springs Center for the Arts and the Wyly Community Art Center, to work with children ages eight to twelve.²⁹⁴ Art center instructors worked with children of existing classes or hand-selected children for this collaborative artmaking event, which also provided an opportunity to teach them about Buddhist and Tibetan culture. Realized within a few weeks, this temporary project was bound by the dates of the conference and the Dalai Lama’s address: “As befitting the transitory nature of existence, it will be installed

²⁹² Katie Redding, "Area Children Honor Dalai Lama," *Aspen Times*, June 22, 2008 June 22, 2008. www.aspentimes.com/article/20080622/NEWS/620993646&parentprofile=search (Feb. 18, 2012).

²⁹³ "From One, Two; and From Two, One," Starn Studio, www.starnstudio.com/Dalai_Lama.html. (Feb. 18, 2012).

²⁹⁴ John Gardner, "Local Kids Make Art for the Dalai Lama with Glenwood Springs Center for the Arts Project," *Post Independent* June 24, 2008. www.postindependent.com/article/20080624/VALLEYNEWS/41004540. (Feb. 18, 2012).

in two hours on July 25 and removed immediately after the Dalai Lama's speech on July 26."²⁹⁵

The stage design became a direct extension of the ongoing work in the studio—the photomicrographs of snowflakes. Magical and impermanent, this image was paired with a symbol of hope, Tibetan Prayer flags, to celebrate the culture of peace and compassion. Each art center art instructor developed their own curriculum and worked with media appropriate for their particular age group. The flags were created in various techniques. Some groups hand-dyed the silk and printed it with the Starns' linoleum block snowflakes, another class of younger children painted their own creations.²⁹⁶

Doug and Mike's challenge was to combine the multitude of individual expressions to a coherent whole. With all rainbow colors put on view, the impression of joyful exuberance dominated the scene, reflective of the young participants' enthusiastic partaking, "Brenda Rodriguez displayed her different prayer flags, each a different variation. 'I want to become an artist, and as an artist, you try different things,' she said, solemnly."²⁹⁷ The creative growth developed through key experiences such as this one clearly demonstrates the empowerment community art infuses beginning at an early age. Doug and Mike's collaborative talent found a new outlet in a project directly engaging local community and children.

²⁹⁵ Redding, "Area Children Honor Dalai Lama."

²⁹⁶ As reported by Gardner and Redding.

²⁹⁷ Redding, "Area Children Honor Dalai Lama."

10. Retreat to the Studio: *Big Bambú*, 2008-09

10.1 Art Making as Reaction to the Constraints of Public Art Process

The idea for a monumental sculpture installation was conceived several years before its realization, while Doug and Mike Starn were consumed with the planning and design of South Ferry Station. Eventually, the new undertaking commenced as several other major projects concluded. The Aspen stage set, a short-term assignment, was deinstalled at the end of July 2008, while construction and installation of the MTA commission continued apace through the end of the year. In September 2008, the erection of *Big Bambú* (Ill. 98) began with the Starns' tenancy of a sizable studio in Beacon, New York.²⁹⁸ Both the MTA and the Aspen commissions were based on invitations related to past work, whereas *Big Bambú* was a studio initiative proving the duo's entrepreneurial spirit.

The public commissions with their intense public interface and administrative processes spurred two results. On the one hand, permanent public art with its prolonged gestation between concept and fabrication and intense administrative interface honed the brothers' experience with complex, team-based projects; on the other hand, the demanding public art process strengthened the artists' desire to carry on with their own studio work, giving them full control over creativity and process. The outcome of this private turn was the pair's first monumental, three-dimensional sculpture.

The fastidious management of public art in a transportation facility challenged Doug and Mike to work under intense scrutiny and temporarily restrained their private artistic practice: "*Big Bambú* came during the *See it split, see it change* project. It was a relief, because we needed and wanted to be free again. *Big Bambú* allows all these things to happen."²⁹⁹ This freedom, to develop art in an experimental fashion, represents the basic difference between commissions and studio work. *Big Bambú* can be viewed as a case study for large-scale, studio initiatives, while engendering

²⁹⁸ "*Big Bambú*," Starn Studio, www.starnstudio.com/Big%20Bambu2.html (March 5, 2012).

²⁹⁹ Starn, "Interview by Christina Lanzl." Nov. 21, 2011.

the release of creative freedom in a team-based approach. By hiring a team of professional climbers to assemble an open-ended structural form, the artists took the collaborative process and sculptural installation to new heights.

10.2 The Antecedent: Sphere of Influence, 1991

Studying the sculptural oeuvre by the Starns confirms *Big Bambú* as a new phase in the ongoing exploration of space in a continuum of evolution in materials and process. The earliest fully three-dimensional work, *Sphere of Influence* (Ill. 17), was suspended from the glass ceiling of the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, Germany as part of the international *Metropolis* survey curated by Christos Joachimedes and Norman Rosenthal. Many years later, *Sphere of Influence* became inspiration for *Big Bambú* in terms of materials and composition, a connection related by Vogel:

The idea grew out of their project 'Sphere of Influence,' which was first shown in Berlin in 1991 and consisted of a rotating globe about 14 feet in diameter made of metal pipe clamps juxtaposed against sheets of transparent photographs. But for 'Big Bambú' pipe was too heavy. 'It didn't have the right qualities,' Doug Starn said. 'This piece is organic. It's all about the things in your life, including those that aren't planned.'³⁰⁰

Starn Studio photos of *Big Bambú*'s installation at the Beacon space document the initial weaving of *Sphere of Influence* into the structure (Ill. 99). Experimentation, chance and interconnectedness are a continuous thread throughout the twin's oeuvre.

In line with most major Starn projects, the title, *Sphere of Influence*, infers multiple meanings. Here, the advancing significance of photography in contemporary art is implied, while interpreting a self-referential notion can also be ascertained. Considered in the context of the Starns' emerging helio-centered work, ergo interpreted as the sun, her central role in driving the universe supplies loaded implications, particularly if the sun is seen as a metaphor for photography. The

³⁰⁰ Carol Vogel, "A Jungle of Bamboo Is Growing Atop the Met," *New York Times* Apr. 23, 2010. C28.

conclusion then is clear that photography has become the leading medium in the arts, a logical conclusion based on the mechanisms of contemporary visual culture.

The curatorial concept of *Metropolis* introduced new paradigms in contemporary art at the beginning of the 1990s, particularly large-scale, three-dimensional works and “[a]rt using photography occupies an important place in the exhibition. This involves not just photographs, but works of art created by photographic means derived from the visual arts tradition.”³⁰¹ The work of Doug and Mike Starn epitomized this definition both in terms of content and process. Other noted photographers in the exhibition included Gilbert & George, Yasumasa Morimura, Cindy Sherman, Thomas Ruff and Jeff Wall, a cohesive group rooted mostly in portrait photography with a particular focus on the self-portrait and appropriation. While the jointly exhibiting photographers have stayed within the medium of photography, the Starn duo already presented their foray into the spatial dimension.

Sphere of Influence, the only suspended work in the *Metropolis* selection, was a twisted, spherical construction of layered maps on film enveloped by a deconstructed orb of steel rods and bent metal strips assembled with pipe clamps. The Starns had switched from black-and-white photo paper to black-and-white ortho film, a high-resolution film of great tonality. As a work incorporating toned film, the gold-toned material revealed a transformed materiality, more akin to gold leaf, thus eluding the medium of photography altogether.³⁰² The sculpture’s self-contained, yet bursting shape anticipated the free-flowing form of *Big Bambú*. Because it is suspended from the glass ceiling, the spherical object suggests a planet or the sun, making “references to the world of objects”, as observed by

³⁰¹ Christos Joachimedes, “The Eye Low on the Horizon.” In: Christos M.; Rosenthal Joachimedes, Norman, ed. *Metropolis: International Art Exhibition, Berlin 1991* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991). 11.

³⁰² The exhibition catalog also features the more two-dimensional, 14-foot high *Blue Medusa* (1990, 426 x 335 x 76 cm. In: Joachimedes 1991 p. 243.), a work that does not appear in the exhibition checklist, presumably a stand-in for the final contribution, *Sphere of Influence*. The *Medusa* installation clearly establishes the link to the medium of photography and the Starn’s recognized interpretations of masterpieces by presenting Géricault’s iconic Romantic painting, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1919), in a pipe-clamp assembly of four large sections printed in hues of blue by applying a filter.

Faust, to “enrich the silence with narrative.”³⁰³ The work responded to the site by referencing building elements of the Martin-Gropius-Bau, while also taking advantage of the gallery’s abundant natural light. The glass ceiling’s steel frame grid is reinterpreted and cited in the bending steel rod assembly, while the toned film alludes to the gilded bands of the gallery’s pillars.

Within the architectural framework and compared to other installations, the sculpture’s 14-foot diameter appears modest in size, an unusual qualifier for a work by the Starns. Smaller still, the ensuing series of illuminated artist books was paralleled by intense conceptual and philosophical investigations, bringing forth the installations and public art on an increasingly grand scale. *Big Bambú* was built in and for a space that matched the size of contemporary museum galleries, whereas *Sphere of Influence*, similar in size to the brothers’ large-scale, two-dimensional works, shrank in perception when transported to a hall on the scale of the Martin-Gropius-Bau.

Sun and light as subject matter are unveiled as Doug and Mike’s new sphere of interest, which led to the illuminated artist books and the journals on the phenomena of light and the sun. The second sculpture from that period, *Amaterasu* (Ill. 100-101), introduced a kinetic element in a floor-to-ceiling installation.³⁰⁴ *Amaterasu* is the name of the Japanese sun goddess within the Shinto religion, indicating the Starns’ immersion in Japanese culture as early as 1993. A minor work in the overall oeuvre, its interest is without question, because it documents the experimentation necessary to advance the work.

³⁰³ Wolfgang Max Faust, “Metropolis and the Art of Our Time.” 19-24. In: Joachimedes, *Metropolis: International Art Exhibition, Berlin 1991*. 22.

³⁰⁴ Mark Barry, “Doug + Mike Starn @ The Armory Show, NYC,” (Mar. 7, 2009). <http://vimeo.com/3512714> (April 8, 2012). The video clip records *Amaterasu*’s kinetic movement.

10.3 The Creative Process

Procuring the Studio

The vision for the new monumental sculpture exceeded the capacity of the Starns' Brooklyn studio. The search for an appropriately scaled space required a search outside of New York City due to the high cost of real estate there, eventually leading the brothers to the Tallix Fine Art Foundry building in Beacon, New York. This town is also home to the highly regarded, expansive Dia Beacon museum complex. The Tallix foundry merged with Polich in 2006, the latter headquartered across the Hudson River on the outskirts of Newburgh. Doug and Mike were introduced to the workshop, when they subcontracted Tallix for the production of their stainless steel fence at South Ferry Station. The main hall of this 40,000-square-foot facility boasts a 320-by-65-foot floor plate with 50-foot ceilings. An adjacent hall houses a glass-blowing workshop, opening additional creative possibilities. Excited by the potential of this space, the Starns procured a rental agreement, disappointed only in its distance from New York City.³⁰⁵

The Right Material

Once the studio space was ready, the question of material became imminent. The Starns had gathered extensive experience in working with pipe clamps and metal poles, but the limitations of these materials quickly became clear. As previously discussed, Mike and Doug revisited *Sphere of Influence* to test materials, for the new project, particularly pipe clamps. Initially, they actually built the new structure around the sphere as documented in process photographs (Ill. 99) and described by the artists:

In the early 1990s, we started putting toned prints between pipe clamps. For *Big Bambú*, we first thought that we could use pipe clamps, but the piece expanded so much that we had to choose a light, strong, and flexible material that could almost effortlessly be moved and connected to others.³⁰⁶

Through experimentation and a process of elimination, the creative process led to

³⁰⁵ Mike Starn, "Interview by Christina Lanzl." Mar. 18, 2011.

³⁰⁶ David Sokol, "A Constant Work in Progress," *Architectural Record* (Nov. 2009). 55. The material limitations are also quoted by Vogel, "A Jungle of Bamboo Is Growing Atop the Met."

the selection of bamboo, a material commonly used for scaffolding, even in skyscraper construction, in Southeast Asia. To the Starns, bamboo offered the same informality, simplicity and rawness so characteristic of their early photo installations.

The wood of giant bamboos, the largest members of the grass family, is considered a sustainable material, because it grows quickly. Its lightness and high flexibility are key characteristics. The ecological approach promotes use of local resources, a standard upheld by the brothers. An American bamboo farm was located in Georgia, where they were able to choose any of three varieties offering varying flexibility and strength. While the artists initially thought of erecting a structure from several hundred, bamboo poles, the advancing project led them to increase the project scope considerably,³⁰⁷ ultimately leading to the assembly of several thousand shafts.

Nylon rope, typically used by rock climbers, lightweight and highly durable, was used to erect the structure. This is a novel use of the material in art. The nylon rope emphasizes the deliberate casualness, a counterpoint to the formal aesthetic of South Ferry Station's *See it split, see it change*. The use of nylon rope differentiates *Big Bambú* as an urban icon, unlike the naturalistic traditions established by Patrick Dougherty, who also assembles his work without hardware, but takes care to conceal the structural connections in his monumental tree sapling installations, which he has created at more than 200 sculpture parks, museums and university campuses since the 1980s.³⁰⁸ Whereas the Starns' industrial, experimental manifestations originally appropriated the equipment of their photo studio and continually explore new materials, Dougherty's technique is derived from the craft of basket weaving and remains firmly rooted within this tradition at a grand scale. Dougherty's figurative and abstract shapes, including walkable dwellings, are always constructed from saplings, usually obtained in proximity to the site.

³⁰⁷ Heinrich Schmidt, "Mike + Doug Starn: Big Bambú / Talk / Part 1/2," (VernissageTV, Apr. 9, 2009). <http://vernissage.tv/blog/2009/04/09/mike-doug-starn-big-bambu-talk-part-12/>. (Mar. 17, 2012).

³⁰⁸ See Patrick Dougherty, *Stickwork* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010).

Collaboration in Construction

With *Big Bambú* the Starns took the concept of collaboration to new heights. Having collaborated with each other since their student days at the Museum School in the mid-1980s, they now assembled a group of professional rock climbers to reach their goal of constructing a self-supporting form (Ill. 103). For the envisioned size this solution was more efficient than to slowly erect the work aided by scaffolding. This method meant that the project was built up organically from the bottom, deliberately freeform and experimental. Envisioning a structure that filled their new studio with its 50-foot ceilings, it made sense to work with a team of builders. In September 2008 the artists hired a dozen climbers whose training and expertise allowed them to gain satisfying height and mass after ten weeks by utilizing climbing rope for all attachments of the bamboo poles, which varied in length from 30 to 40 feet. Temin described the process:

The Starns planned everything out at floor level, using a model made of willow reeds, but above that the climbers have leeway. The twins give general directions as to the ebb and flow of the piece, and then leave the climbers on their own. Some of the poles, the Starns note, are there for aesthetic rather than structural reasons, so that the work grows from thick to thin, as they wanted.³⁰⁹

This team-based approach is a successful practice in collaboration, because each participant is fully engaged in the decision-making process, allowing for everyone's own aesthetic and structural choices. The same grassroots organizing techniques engaged the children in the creating of prayer flags for the stage at Aspen. While the climbers had general instruction to build the structure following their own individual judgment, Doug and Mike led the project and participated directly in the construction itself.

The construction, of course, was paralleled by an ongoing photo shoot as *Big Bambú* evolved. Photographs indeed were the perfect means to judge the work's ongoing transformation on camera, serving as a tool to edit and redesign. A 25-foot scissor lift served as a platform to photograph the structure from all angles and

³⁰⁹ Christine Temin, "Doug and Mike Starn: Reveling in Chaos," *Sculpture* Vol. 29, Issue 8 (Oct. 2010). 30.

perspectives: "We took columns and rows of photographs and stitched them back together, but because there's no distinct perspective, since there's no exact science to it, that's kind of exciting."³¹⁰ The possibilities of photographing and assembling collaged images from different orthographic viewpoints offered immense creative potential, precisely because the Starns had both invented and owned the object, much like a giant photographer's set design. Alix Browne of the New York Times provided an early observation of the outcome:

The piece, which is made from 2,000 bamboo poles lashed together with some 16 miles of nylon rope, was assembled under the artists' direction by a team of about a dozen rock climbers over a period of 10 weeks. Seemingly self-generating, 'Big Bambú' grew from within itself, without the support of external scaffolding, making it more akin to a living organism than anything constructed by human hands.³¹¹

Defining the work as a living organism coincides with the Starns' understanding of the installation as a continuous work in progress. This continuous viewing and reviewing does emphasize process, giving the artists a sense of the endless possibilities of transformation, once again analogous to Buddhist philosophy. This evolutionary view of the structure also characterizes time-based art, thus manifesting *Big Bambú* as a combination of sculpture, architecture, performance and, last but not least, photography. Mike Starn has referred to *Big Bambú* as "a new lexicon of the interconnectedness of all things,"³¹² continuing the metaphor of the *Structure of Thought* series and the South Ferry Station installation.

The Title

The title of the Starns' largest work to date, *Big Bambú: You Can't, You Don't, and You Won't Stop*, is composed of two pop culture references: it is a direct quotation of the 1972 LP *Big Bambú* by comedy duo Cheech & Chong, renowned for its counterculture humor and superb voice imitations. The album mimicked a giant rolling paper package and, by the nature of its title, also references the material of the installation. Art critic Christine Temin wrote that the recording was popular

³¹⁰ Schmidt, "Mike + Doug Starn: Big Bambú / Talk / Part 1/2."

³¹¹ Alix Browne, "'It's always finished and it's never finished.' Mike Starn," *New York Times Magazine* (March 29, 2009). 47.

³¹² Sokol, "A Constant Work in Progress."

entertainment during the construction phase, leading to its adoption as a working title.³¹³ Her analysis offers a discreet window on American, alternative lifestyles and, in particular, artists' way of life.

The subtitle, *You Can't, You Won't, and You Don't Stop*, refers to "a 1994 hip-hop song by the Beastie Boys whose carefree, rebellious spirit complemented their mood and working mode."³¹⁴ Rooting titles in popular culture demonstrates Doug and Mike's identification with the genre, consistent with their general artistic appeal as populists, rather than elitists. *You Can't, You Don't, and You Won't Stop* refers to the performance aspect of *Big Bambú*, as noted by Mejias, continuing the investigation of the interconnectedness of all things, the systems of art, science and nature.³¹⁵ This title also implies the obsessive nature of Doug and Mike Starn's creative approach. Project-based work that engages multiple participants and partners does contain a self-propelling nature, a point of no return, at which decisions have to be made and actions cause reactions that need to be responded to. Doug and Mike's art and success lie in their creativity, combined with kindness and intelligent management of all processes and relationships.

10.4 Getting the Word Out: Big Bambú's Studio Debut

As an initiative driven by the Starn Studio, *Big Bambú* relied on internal marketing efforts to move from studio production to an exhibition at a cultural venue. To mobilize their resources, they worked efficiently with the tools typically engaged by artists: an open studio event, gallery representation, a presence at the international art fairs, and the media. The efficiency of their approach is evident in the installation just one year later in the roof garden at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the most visible international art venue of New York.

³¹³ Temin, "Doug and Mike Starn: Reveling in Chaos." 30.

³¹⁴ Ibid. 30. In the article the Beastie Boys title is quoted incorrectly.

³¹⁵ Jordan Mejias, "Kulturspektakel: Im Dickicht der Stadt," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 21, 2010. www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/kulturspektakel-im-dickicht-der-stadt-11011152.html (Mar. 23, 2012).

Public Viewing at the Starn Studio, Beacon, NY on March 8, 2009

On March 8, 2009, Doug and Mike organized a public viewing in Beacon that afforded the public its first glimpse of *Big Bambú*.³¹⁶ VernissageTV's video recording of the event is a free online resource, accessible in two parts. The reception for invited guests, many from the New York art community, included an artist talk with a question-and-answer period, conducted by Doug and Mike from the heights of the bamboo scaffolding. Artist open houses or open studios offer a critical opportunity for an informal introduction of work in progress. It is fortunate that the Starn event was recorded, because the video offers an excellent resource of the artist's voice in the studio. Considering Beacon's distance to New York, it also afforded potential invitees the opportunity to get a glimpse of *Big Bambú*, should their presence on the day of the event not have been possible.

The Art Market

Wetterling Gallery introduced *Big Bambú* in two-dimensional form at two leading art market venues in the United States. In December 2008, only four months after the building commenced in Beacon, *Big Bambú* debuted at Art Basel Miami Beach, followed by the Armory Show in New York the following March. Later that year, Wetterling presented the studio installation in a photo exhibition at their Stockholm gallery. Founded in 1978, Wetterling Gallery, one of Sweden's leading galleries for international contemporary art and particularly painting, participates in several international art fairs each year. With this profile, it was the ideal partner to introduce *Big Bambú* to the art world. The relationship began in 2004 with the exhibition *I'm a negative falling down to the light a silhouette veins flowing with black visible to these useless blind eyes*.

Wetterling became the duo's main gallery following a final exhibition with Leo Castelli Gallery prior to its closing in 2005, which ended their New York gallery representation. Wetterling's important role in the promotion of *Big Bambú* was akin to Baldwin Gallery's introduction of the snow crystals series to Aspen's cultural community. This introduction was one of the catalysts leading to the stage

³¹⁶ Schmidt, "Mike + Doug Starn: Big Bambú / Talk / Part 1/2." (Apr. 9, 2009) vernissage.tv/blog/2009/04/09/mike-doug-starn-big-bambu-talk-part-12/. (Mar. 5, 2012).

design commission. The Wetterling affiliation helped open the door to the *Big Bambú* commissions.

The medium of photography offers *Big Bambú* a presence both as temporary installation and as independent photo series. The photographs, of course, are the key medium to document the work for presentation to potential venues for the structure, as well.

Press and Media

The international exposure of *Big Bambú* to the art market underlines the high aspirations for the project. Their strategic effort reached wide audiences, particularly in combination with the outreach to the press and media. Beyond online video (see above), the diverse coverage includes blogs,³¹⁷ as well as articles in major newspapers,³¹⁸ magazines³¹⁹ and professional journals.³²⁰ These articles without exception describe the work in progress at the studio, along with photographs stressing the installation's spectacular size that filled an enormous, industrial hall.

A memorable photograph accompanies each article, printed exclusively in that particular publication. Doug and Mike created several of the feature photos in their typical collage style with irregular boundaries (Sokol and Albert). Digital Photoshop assembly has replaced the typical scotch-tape assembly of the early work. All photos include at least one person climbing in the sculpture or on the ground, serving as a scale reference and also indicating the work in progress. The images show the work from various angles, either high up looking down (Albert), or walking below the work (Sokol). The *New York Times* featured an impressive, though more standard, frontal press photo of the dozen climbers, including Doug and Mike Starn posing between the joists of *Big Bambú*, by Jason Schmidt

³¹⁷ Christopher Albert, "Mike & Doug Starn's Big Bambu Taking Root in Beacon " in *MAYKR* (maykr.blogspot.com/2008/12/mike-doug-starns-big-bambu-taking-root.html, Dec. 14, 2008). (Apr. 8, 2012).

³¹⁸ Browne, "'It's always finished and it's never finished.' Mike Starn." 47.

³¹⁹ Doug and Mike Starn, "5th Anniversary Issue: Artwork by Doug and Mike Starn," *New York Times Magazine* Aug. 16, 2009. Cover photograph.

³²⁰ Sokol, "A Constant Work in Progress." 55.

(Browne). The natural coloration of the bamboo, combined with the dominant gray of the architectural interior continues the palette of natural hues. The coloration leans toward the monochrome and closely resembles the early black-and-white photography.

To celebrate its 5th anniversary the editorial leadership of the *New York Times Style Magazine* commissioned a special series of magazine covers. One of these exclusive commissions was awarded to Doug and Mike, an honor they shared with half a dozen leading contemporary artists.³²¹ For the August 16 edition the twins endeavored a monumental “T” constructed of bamboo in the emblematic *New York Times* typeface. To enhance legibility, the letter is constructed of densely layered bamboo stalks and the skylights were covered for the photo shoot. In the picture twelve vigorously building climbers are positioned throughout the 50-foot letter. Clearly, the work is under construction in a humorous and very appropriate analogy to a busy publishing office, where everyone is performing tasks facing the next deadline. The entire scene recalls an idyllic Norman Rockwell setting, whose popular illustrations reflected life and work in American culture on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* for over four decades. With this photograph, the Starns celebrate work and creativity – their own as well as that of the *Times*, and the world at large.

All photos of *Big Bambú*, and the *Times Magazine* cover introduce the Starns’ commitment to sharing their artmaking process with the public. By introducing a team of rock climbers, they stress the collaborative nature, a process they have employed themselves throughout their shared career. The continuously changing form of *Big Bambú* underlines the performative quality. The imagery records continuous change and open-endedness, while conveying the collaborative nature of their work. The work itself becomes performance. This documentation of studio process is taken to the next level at the public venues, where the installation indeed morphs into a public performance sculpture.

³²¹ Starn, "5th Anniversary Issue: Artwork by Doug and Mike Starn." Cover photograph.

11. *Big Bambú*: International Temporary Outdoor Installations

11.1 *Choosing Partners and Sites*

The open house at the Starn Studio in Beacon garnered immediate interest in significant public installations of *Big Bambú*. Further, the inclusion of the project at two major U.S. art fairs, along with the positive and extensive initial press coverage, introduced *Big Bambú* to the art world and the public. Initially, the installation was considered by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority for temporary installation at New York's Grand Central Station.³²² At this truly public, major Manhattan transportation hub, permitting and security requirements would have been formidable. The Starns had developed a relationship with the MTA Arts for Transit office in the context of the South Ferry Station project. However, from their past experience in working with public agencies they determined that working with a partner or private client to implement a project offered the necessary framework and capacity for a less demanding permitting process, because the partner can mobilize in-house expertise and resources. The brothers made a conscious decision to obtain private commissions.³²³ This allows them the artistic freedom and room to experiment, allowing their work to continue breaking boundaries, which is more difficult to achieve when working with a public agency.

Big Bambú as performance became possible when the work was sited at the Metropolitan Museum, because this environment engages in the international dialog of contemporary art, in which performance art emerged as an important art form. This was also evident in the Performa Biennial, a leading international performance festival staged in New York since 2005.³²⁴ Further, museum programs cultivate interactive and educative visitor experiences. The artists' and climbing team's ongoing performance of *Big Bambú* in their building and structuring indeed added an innovative dimension to this public art project.

³²² Bloodworth, "Interview by Christina Lanzl."

³²³ Starn, "Interview by Christina Lanzl." Mar. 18, 2011.

³²⁴ For a concise history of performance art and the New York Performa Biennial see Rose Lee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London, UK: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

11.2 Metropolitan Museum of Art, April 27–October 31, 2010

Founded in 1870, the Metropolitan Museum of Art preserves, studies and presents a world-renowned, encyclopedic collection of the world's cultures. Its Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Roof Garden opened to the public in 1987, made possible by a gift of the philanthropist couple after whom it is named. The roof garden, perched atop the museum in its green setting on 5th Avenue, offers spectacular views of Central Park and the surrounding New York skyline, with the additional amenity of an outdoor café and bar. Solo artist installations commenced in 1998, making *Big Bambú* (Ill. 102-104) the thirteenth annual summer exhibit. Previously featured artists were, in order of appearance, Ellsworth Kelly, Magdalena Abakanowicz, David Smith, Joel Shapiro, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Goldsworthy, Sol LeWitt, Cai Guo-Qiang, Frank Stella, Jeff Koons, and Roxy Paine. Although international in scope, most of those artists have been based in New York. The scale and complexity of *Big Bambú* exceeds all previous roof garden installations, which had been individual works of limited scale.

Logistics and Implementation

Invited to the open studio in Beacon in spring 2009, the Metropolitan Museum of Art curators showed an interest in *Big Bambú* for the roof garden, leading to the installation there rather than at Grand Central Station. Continuing the Starns' reputation for testing new ground, *New York Times* critic Carol Vogel commented that Metropolitan Museum curator Gary Tinterow "has decided to try something more ambitious [...], a site-specific installation that is part sculpture, part architecture and part performance."³²⁵ The Metropolitan Museum as a leading international art venue has the resources to undertake the permitting process in partnership with the artists. Temin described the support that associate curator Anne Strauss and the institution were able to provide:

After the Starns came up with their rough willow model for the project, the negotiations were intense, says Strauss. She talks about the bureaucratic nightmare of public art. Not even the mighty Met could avoid getting permissions from several city agencies so that the project could go ahead. 'In Beacon, they could do whatever they wanted,' she says, sounding grateful that they were willing to go through the process to see the work

³²⁵ Carol Vogel, "See It, Feel It, Touch It, Climb It," *New York Times* Feb. 12, 2010. C25-L.

accomplished. On the other hand, she notes, quite correctly, that 'having the Met behind them was important.'³²⁶

This caring and loyal assistance put the artist first, with the museum serving to protect the Starns' interests. In all areas concerning the successful implementation of a public art project, the Museum has excellent staff resources. For the permitting process, the *Big Bambú* planning team was able to draw on the expertise of Marco Leona of the Department of Scientific Research at the Metropolitan, an expert in conservation. For the public opening on April 27 the completed scaffold would measure 30 by 50 by 100 feet. The artists with the team of rock climbers continued building, shaping and filling in the interior over the summer months (Ill. 103). Attentively, Miller pointed out the new direction of *Big Bambú*, while documenting the Starns' experience with public art gleaned at South Ferry Station.³²⁷ Because key considerations for public art concern safety and appropriateness for interaction, testing for *Big Bambú* during the construction phase took intense efforts, including load-bearing tests, Vogel reported:

Last week, after a main portion of the first phase of construction was completed, the installation was subjected to load testing, which involved scattering 350 sandbags weighing 50 pounds each and leaving them there for 24 hours. (The project passed with flying colors, Met officials said.)³²⁸

Tinterow admitted that *Big Bambú* was "our largest, most complicated endeavor and the only one that invites the public to participate," and explained: "We have been working with the building department to conform to the proper safety standards. There will be lockers for belongings, because [...] visitors must have their hands totally free while climbing."³²⁹ This level of responsiveness to permitting requirements required additional resources, increasing budget and workload.

All visitors were permitted to view the installation from the main roof level, while those looking for a more unusual experience also had the opportunity to purchase

³²⁶ Temin, "Doug and Mike Starn: Reveling in Chaos." 35.

³²⁷ Leigh Anne Miller, "The Met's Rooftop Jungle Gym," *Art in America* 98, no. 4 (April 5, 2010). 143.

³²⁸ Vogel, "A Jungle of Bamboo Is Growing Atop the Met." C28.

³²⁹ ———, "See It, Feel It, Touch It, Climb It." C25(L).

tickets for walking its elevated walkways (Ill. 104). Unusual for an art installation, but necessary for *Big Bambú*, art critics, including Vogel,³³⁰ Stein³³¹ and Mejias,³³² received information on and pointed out the safety requirements in their articles. Safety precautions for climbing the sculpture included the wearing of closed, rubber-soled shoes without heels and the prerequisite not to consume alcohol or drugs before a visit. Excluded were persons weighing over 400 pounds, while people with heart conditions, vertigo, claustrophobia or agoraphobia, among other limitations, were advised not to undertake the tour. Beyond that, patrons needed to sign a waiver, assuming all risks and disbaring legal action, to protect the museum and the artists from potential claims.

Funding was the key to realizing *Big Bambú*, and the Metropolitan Museum's fundraising capacities are extraordinary. As both public art installation and ongoing performance, the work needed not only to be installed, but also to be staged for Doug and Mike's ongoing presence, together with that of the rock climbing team. The figures are not released, but *Big Bambú* was made possible with the support of several major sponsors. The largest contributor was Bloomberg media, an annual supporter of the Met's roof garden series, joined by Cynthia Hazen Polsky and Leon B. Polsky, as well as the Jane and Robert Carroll Fund.³³³

If success is measured by attendance, the figures speak for themselves: internationally, *Big Bambú* ranked fourth in visitors to a contemporary art exhibition, and it was the ninth highest attended exhibition since the Metropolitan Museum of Art's founding.³³⁴

³³⁰ ———, "A Jungle of Bamboo Is Growing Atop the Met." C25.

³³¹ Hannes Stein, "Im Bambuswald der Großstadt," *Die Welt* (July 07, 2010), <http://www.welt.de/die-welt/kultur/article8348626/Im-Bambuswald-der-Grossstadt.html>. (Mar. 24, 2012).

³³² Jordan Mejias, "Kulturspektakel: Im Dickicht der Stadt." (July 21, 2010). – As German national, Mejias also points out the difference in the legal structure between the U.S. and Germany, which necessitates a higher level of precautionary legal measures in the U.S.

³³³ "Big Bambú Attracts Stephen Hawking," *Met Matters* (July 2, 2010). 1.

³³⁴ "Glasstress Special Project, Big Bambú," Starn Studio, www.starnstudio.com/Big%20Bambu%20Venice.html (Mar. 25, 2012).

Interpretation

Visually, *Big Bambú* is closely related to the tree layers of the *Structure of Thought* suite. The sculpture is a three-dimensional extension of the photo medium. In this new work, the organic network of branches has been replaced with a man-made, geometric construct, whose depth and myriad layers, once again, translates into a flat surface through the medium of photography. Intermediality indeed characterizes the nature of *Big Bambú*, even more so, because of its temporary existence, because that necessitates its transfer to another medium in order to continue its existence.

The work can be classified within four artistic genres. First, *Big Bambú* exists as large-scale sculpture or architectural construct. Secondly, Mike and Doug Starn transformed the work into a performance piece by exhibiting the continual building and assembling during public viewing hours. What's more, visitors were invited to climb the structure, thereby introducing the element of interactivity. Thirdly, the object serves as photographer's set design for purely self-invented subject matter for a portfolio of photographs. Last not least, *Big Bambú* is public art. A work seen in public space, even if not accessed and created through private commission and on private property is public art. It was viewed free of charge by millions of residents and visitors to Central Park and neighboring buildings (Ill. 102) and is documented on the world wide web in ever growing numbers of images and entries. This multidimensional layering of styles represents an important characteristic of intermediality in the visual arts, which becomes particularly evident in the Starns' collaborative approach and their dedication to process.

The Starns' transition from studio art to public art with the beginning of the 21st century was examined by Bengtson-Lykoudis: "Best known for their torn and stained mixed media photo collages during the 1990s, the identical twins have found their 21st century niche creating works of public art."³³⁵ Deducing from the use of bamboo and the organic, growing form, systems, forests and nature are expressed in a constructed, but simultaneously wild, assemblage. Within the

³³⁵ Kirsten Bengtson-Lykoudis, "Met Roof Goes Tiki Tiki," (July 4, 2010). www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/17495. (Mar. 27, 2012).

overall oeuvre, the duo's *Structure of Thought* photo series reinstates the correlation to trees and systems.

Characteristic for *Big Bambú* is a clear choice by the Starns and the Metropolitan Museum to present the creative process, which appeared consistently in interpretive communications about the work.³³⁶ Materials and dimensions are as relevant as the conceptual framework. Materiality, however, is often absent in communications about art in daily newspapers and even in art journals, perhaps due to the fact that artists often remain in the background, while the exhibition venue and professionals unfamiliar with materials and fabrication, become the conduit of information or because artists try to guard their process. Doug and Mike Starn are accessible and provide clear statements regarding all aspects of the work, and make this information available, such as the Met's *Big Bambú* press release, which is available online on the studio website. The release contains the crucial primary source for critics:

Big Bambú is a continually growing and changing sculpture that will be constructed during the run of the installation from thousands of fresh-cut bamboo poles—a complex network of 5,000 interlocking 30- and 40-foot-long bamboo poles, which will be lashed together with 50 miles of nylon rope. [...] Working on the sculpture while the exhibition is open to the public, the artists and teams of rock climbers (six to twenty of whom will be present during different phases of the project) will provide visitors with a rare opportunity to experience their work as it unfolds.³³⁷

While *Big Bambú* initially emerged undefined and then took the form of an arch in its experimental phase at the Beacon studio, Doug and Mike Starn intended to shape a large, cresting wave at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, calling to mind a famous Japanese color woodcut in the museum's collection, Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, also known as *The Wave* (c. 1829-32. Color woodcut,

³³⁶ For example, Carol Vogel of the New York Times accompanied the process in two articles and as co-author of a video, representing a strong interest and extraordinary visibility. See: Vogel, "See It, Feel It, Touch It, Climb It." C25(L). Also: ———, "A Jungle of Bamboo Is Growing Atop the Met." C28. Access the video at: Stefania; Vogel Rousselle, Carol, "Arts: Big Bambú - nytimes.com/video," (Apr. 27, 2010). www.nytimes.com/video/2010/04/22/arts/design/1247467682400/big-bamb.html (Mar. 27, 2012).

³³⁷ "Doug + Mike Starn on the Roof: Big Bambú," Starn Studio, www.starnstudio.com/Big%20Bambu%20Met.html (Mar. 25, 2012). Notably, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's April 27, 2010 press release is posted on the Starns' website, as well as the extensive bibliography.

10.1 × 14.9 inches. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Given the Starns' penchant for Japanese art, the wave image poignantly alludes to the great presence and all-consuming nature of *Big Bambú*. According to the brothers, it is to be understood not as "a sculpture, but as an organism that we are part of—helping it to move along."³³⁸ I see the choice of the wave as a symbol of life, representing both constructive and destructive qualities, an element that is present in the continual transformation bestowed by the construction team. In line with the Starns' lifelong maxim, the metaphor further implies change and continuity.

New York as one of the major international art centers regularly offers notable, temporary public art installations. *Big Bambú's* superlative nature led art critics Mejias³³⁹ and Bengtson-Lykoudis³⁴⁰ to place the work in a trajectory with, recent major temporary public art installations in New York City, such as Olafur Eliasson's *New York City Waterfalls* of 2008 (Ill. 105). Zeaman established the connection to Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Gates* (Ill. 106) in Central Park: "Like that one, it's part stunt and part art, with a communal spirit and with a limited life, destroyed at the end like a Buddhist sand painting."³⁴¹ Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Gates*, installed immediately adjacent to the Met, along dozens of Central Park walkways, had captured international attention five years earlier. The comparison is well chosen. Like Doug and Mike Starn, husband and wife team Christo and Jeanne-Claude created their work in a life-long collaboration.³⁴² Akin to *Big Bambú*, but much simpler due to its installation in a public park, *The Gates* gave visitors an interactive experience as they strolled through the bright orange, sequenced gates. And like *Big Bambú*, the couple's renowned wrappings are also self-initiated.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's chosen sites often require complex arrangements with the owners. In the case of Central Park, the project had a twenty-five-year lead-time

³³⁸ Karen Wilkin, "Branching Out Atop the Met Museum," *Wall Street Journal* (May 10, 2010), http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704302304575214351111410626.html?mod=WSJ_NY_MIDDLEThirdStories. (Mar. 25, 2012).

³³⁹ Mejias, "Kulturspektakel: Im Dickicht der Stadt."

³⁴⁰ Bengtson-Lykoudis, "Met Roof Goes Tiki Tiki."

³⁴¹ John Zeaman, "Review of 'Big Bambu' Sculpture Installation on the Roof of Metropolitan Museum," *The Record* (May 3, 2010), http://www.northjersey.com/arts_entertainment/92647584_Bamboozled_and_bedazzled_by_a_twig_pile.html. (Mar. 24, 2012).

³⁴² Jeanne-Claude passed away in 2009.

between introduction of the concept to New York's Central Park Conservancy and the actual installation. Great concern was expressed over the potential damages to Central Park, but New York's economic downturn following September 11 instigated a change of heart, leading the City administration under the governance of Mayor Michael Bloomberg to support the project in an effort to revive cultural tourism.³⁴³ By comparison, the Starn partnership with the Met resulted in immediate production, while the cultural partnership constellation solidified as the brothers' preferred approach. Noteworthy is also that both pairs resided in New York.

The popular appeal, intended by the artists, combined with *Big Bambú's* open-ended, interactive nature, became a source of criticism. If art becomes a spectacle, both Zeaman³⁴⁴ and Wilkin argue, its seriousness becomes questionable:

Is 'Big Bambú' a significant sculpture? No—it's more of a phenomenon. But it's a delightful addition to the Met for the next six months—a temporary, ecologically correct folly designed to entertain. Like 18th-century follies, with their references to classical temples or medieval ruins, 'Big Bambú' provokes meditation on larger issues.³⁴⁵

While Wilkin notes the temporary nature, she questions its validity. This argument disregards the different roles of temporary and permanent public art. As a temporary work, *Big Bambú* exceeds the known standards of size and public accessibility, which endows its extraordinary credence within the genre of large-scale temporary installation. In extending this argument, the question arises, whether *Tribute in Light* (see chapter 4.3) has more validity, because it commemorates 9/11. Meaning in art is not necessarily derived from its acknowledgment of factual events or an easily definable frame of reference.

³⁴³ This tenacity and persistence earned them a Great Negotiator Award from Harvard Law School in 2008: "Christo and Jean-Claude," (Jan. 1, 2010), <http://www.pon.harvard.edu/tag/christo-and-jeanne-claude>. www.pon.harvard.edu/events/the-2008-great-negotiators/ (Mar. 2, 2013). – Christo and Jeanne-Claude outlined the 25-year negotiation process for *The Gates* at a lecture held at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, which I attended.

³⁴⁴ Zeaman, "Review of 'Big Bambu' Sculpture Installation on the Roof of Metropolitan Museum". May 3, 2010, www.northjersey.com/arts_entertainment/92647584_Bamboozled_and_bedazzled_by_a_twig_pile.html (Apr. 25, 2012).

³⁴⁵ Wilkin, "Branching Out Atop the Met Museum".

11.3 Venice Biennial, May 29–June 15, 2011

Following *Big Bambú's* summary success at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Doug and Mike Starn proceeded with a new version the following year as an official collateral exhibition to the 54th Venice Biennale, curated by Glasstress 2011. The selected site was the courtyard of Casa Artom, located next to the Guggenheim Palace on the Canale Grande (Ill. 107-110). The property serves as the Venice campus of Wake Forest University, whose main campus sits in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. This academic setting in its premiere location on Venice's main thoroughfare and next-door neighbor to one of the city's major cultural institutions became the site for the Starns' new epic, contemporary public art project. Quite a novelty for the known proportions of the surrounding historic architecture, this temporary structure queried the status quo. The power of truly successful, time-based public work lies in its capacity to introduce new perspectives on perceived realities one takes for granted.

Big Bambú, a 50-foot-tall hollow tower, approximately twice the height of the Casa, emerged from within and became a temporary landmark along Venice's main canal, illustrated in the project rendering (Ill. 107). The tower's walkway connected to a roof patio, where visitors could enjoy the surroundings with its views of Venice. Looking up from the base, the walkway snakes up to the dense oculus of the viewing platform (Ill. 108). Exhibition dates of the biennial were June 4 to November 27, 2011, whereas the Starn contribution was open to the public from May 29 through June 15 only. The more limited, two-and-a-half week schedule points to the complexities of several partners working together, financing of materials and ongoing bamboo construction by the team.

Big Bambú's complex logistics required careful budget planning. The bamboo for Venice was imported from a farm in France, although some already built elements, particularly the paths, were imported from New York to save time and materials (Ill. 109). The bamboo farm was also won as a sponsor, while a travel agency supported the rock-climbing team's travel. While the Venice tower was precisely defined as a form, the edifice's overall scale was more limited than in New York (Ill. 110). Further, while security in Venice was less stringent, Kiša Lala confirmed the

previously established protocol of a signed release for access.³⁴⁶ Carol Vogel had the opportunity to interview and study the installation both at the New York and Venice venues:

Mike Starn noted that this site was somewhat smaller than at the Met, 'But it's still the same piece,' he insisted. Except in Venice about 3000 poles are required, shipped here by boat. [...] Not being associated with a giant institution like the Met means things are more relaxed. [...] "We don't have the manpower here," Mike Starn said.³⁴⁷

These statements indicate the Starns' executive involvement with all aspects of *Big Bambú*, as well as participation in the on-site work as part of the construction team.

Context of the 54th Biennial

Organized every two years since 1895, today's format of the Biennale rests on three main "pillars": the Pavilions of the participating countries in the Giardini, the Biennale curator's international exhibition at the added Arsenale location, and collateral events submitted to the curator for approval. The 54th Biennale di Venezia offered an expansive international art fair of over 200 exhibitions, of which 89 were housed in the pavilions. Swiss director Bice Curiger's guiding principle for the international exhibition, "ILLUMInations [,] celebrates light: "Light is a classical theme in art and perfect complement to Venice."³⁴⁸ She further explicates: "Light seeks to accentuate the 'light' of cognitive experience and the intercommunicative, intellectual understanding that accompanies moments of epiphany."³⁴⁹ The theme of light and enlightenment, of course, also dominates the Starn oeuvre, underscoring the suitability for this particular biennial.

Merely organized as a joint exhibition, Doug and Mike Starn are not included in the Biennale catalogue. Nevertheless, *Big Bambú* complemented the Biennale and the official United States contribution by the artist team of Jennifer Allora and

³⁴⁶ Kiša Lala, "Venice Biennale: A Temple of Transience By Mike And Doug Starn," *Huffington Post*, June 16, 2011. www.huffingtonpost.com/kisa-lala/doug-and-mike-starn-in-ve_b_875556.html (Mar. 29, 2012).

³⁴⁷ Carol Vogel, "Above the Grand Canal, 'Big Bambú' Rises," *New York Times* Jun. 3, 2011. 22.

³⁴⁸ Bice Curiger, ed. *ILLUMInations: 54. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, la Biennale di Venezia* (Venezia: Fondazione, La Biennale di Venezia, 2011). 43.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 44.

Guillermo Calzadilla (Ill. 111).³⁵⁰ The Starn project along the Canale Grande offered a counterpoint to Allora and Calzadilla's exhibition at the United States Pavilion, whose *Gloria* multi-media installation and performance program thematized the global condition of commerce, sports and war with biting irony. Commissioner Lisa Freiman had proposed the duo because of the collaborative, neo-surrealist de-familiarization tactics in their intensely political practice.³⁵¹

Markedly, the Allora & Calzadilla exhibition included a public art and performance component in the form of an upturned tank turned treadmill in front of the United States Pavilion, a contribution to the profound discourse of public art *and* performance in contemporary art that complements Doug and Mike Starns work. The Allora & Calzadilla devices alluded to the perfectionist design of commercial and military objects, while scrutinizing American and global icons:

These poetic, monumental works utilize the quasi-Surrealist strategies of free association and unexpected juxtaposition in order to pose questions about the relationships among art, politics, and international identity in the 21st century. The result is a series of artistic experiments that explore how physical, visual, and audible experiences can destabilize established narratives about nationalistic and competitive enterprises, including the Olympic games, the national pavilions of the Venice Biennale, international commerce, and the military.³⁵²

In the sheltered public space of the Giardini, the chains of a tank turned upside-down provocatively served as treadmill base for runners in front of the pavilion. The sustainable energy harvested by performers in this manner rotated the tank chains, offering a mocking interpolation of armed action, sport, and the human condition. Allora & Calzadilla's commentary stood in stark contrast to the *Big Bambú* construct of connectedness and magical energy, which allowed visitors' immersion and a glimpse of Venice from above. These two diametrically opposed,

³⁵⁰ Please see also the analysis of Allora and Calzadilla's collaborative practice in chapter 2.6.

³⁵¹ Lisa Freiman, United States Pavilion commissioner and chair of the contemporary department at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, gave a detailed account of the commissioning process in her interview with Lucie Alig, "The Collaborator: Curator Lisa Freiman on Allora & Calzadilla's Provocative U.S. Pavilion for the Venice Biennale," *Blouin Artinfo* (Aug. 2, 2011), www.artinfo.com/news/story/35951/the-collaborator-curator-lisa-freiman-on-allora-calzadillas-provocative-us-pavilion-for-the-venice-biennale. (Mar. 28, 2012).

³⁵² Lisa Freiman. "United States of America – Gloria." In: Curiger, *ILLUMInations: 54. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, la Biennale di Venezia*. 464.

artistic statements put into sharp focus the richness of creative endeavor and philosophical nuances inherent in a single country, as well as worldwide, while presenting a new standard for artistic collaboration.

At the Giardini and the Arsenale, Katharina Fritsch of Germany and the Austrian artist Franz West presented two, more traditional, outdoor works. Franz West “is concerned with how audiences relate to his art. He rarely allows passive observation, adopting a “do touch” approach and encouraging viewers to hold his sculptures and interact with them.”³⁵³ *Big Bambú* also proffers this interaction, although West’s entire lifework is distinguished by this principle. West presented two projects at the 54th Biennial: an indoor installation of the artist’s kitchen in one of the Para-Pavilions and the sculpture *Eidos* (2009). Placed in a Giardini pond, the object lacked the opportunity for public interaction. Fabricated of pink, powder-coated aluminum, the simple, tubular form formed a vertical knot as it rose from the water, catching the eye with its bright coloration. Katharina Fritsch presented her DayGlo-colored still life group of sculptures at the tip of the Arsenale at the lagoon walkway, a humorous “collection of (more or less) religious iconography, including a Madonna, a Saint Nicholas, a skull, a serpent and an egg.”³⁵⁴ These casts of enlarged keepsakes commonly found at souvenir shops posed in a tight arrangement, forming a colorful contrast with nature and the Arsenale’s brick architecture. In their scale, form and subject matter, the public sculptures by both Fritsch and West occupied the landscape like traditional garden sculptures, lacking significant statements concerning the contemporary field of public art, whereas *Big Bambú* successfully introduced questions of scale, tradition, urban context and interaction.

Overall, the 2011 Biennale di Venezia featured a small number of public art projects and remains a genre with potential for growth. First and foremost, curator Bice Curiger has to be credited for introducing a new fusion of sculpture and architecture, the “Para-Pavilions, largish structures of a sculptural nature capable

³⁵³ Ibid. 294.

³⁵⁴ Ibid. 186. – Fritsch represented Germany at the 46th Biennale. In 2011, German commissioner Susanne Gaensheimer presented film, theater and opera director Christoph Schlingensiefel, an exhibition that received the Golden Lion.

of harboring works by other artists.”³⁵⁵ Fittingly, Curiger’s innovation addressed the ongoing dialectic regarding the convergence of art and architecture, while simultaneously nurturing collaboration in the integration of art and architecture. The innovation of the Para-Pavilions resulted in temporary edifices by the American Oscar Tuazon, Song Dong from China and Polish artist Monika Sosnowska.

New media lend themselves to interaction and collaboration in public environments. At the 2011 Biennale di Venezia Dropstuff.eu, the “urban screen network for digital and interactive arts,”³⁵⁶ erected three large-scale LED screens at prominent locations, an expanded version of the previous biennial exhibit. Dropstuff.eu’s curatorial team, comprised of several museums, a film festival and a foundation in the Netherland, devised a synchronized, interactive program by Dutch artists and designers that allowed visitors to communicate with each other between Venice locales and a series of publicly accessible sites in the Netherlands. ArtBase³⁵⁷ and the U.S.-Asian network, SIGGRAPH, are comparable digital media networks. Lacking a targeted, curatorial oversight, Dropstuff’s repeat participation was a missed opportunity to introduce new global trends in the burgeoning field of public media art, evident in a number of international media and public art festivals, such as the European Media Art Festival, South America’s Electronic Language International Festival, and the Boston Cyberarts Festival in the U.S.

Lastly, in the Citta di Venezia, Anish Kapoor’s privately sponsored *Ascension* was a prominent installation during the Biennale, composed of an ethereal, spiraling vapor column that rose into the dome of San Giorgio Maggiore.³⁵⁸ Both Kapoor and the Starns have a penchant for the monumental, public art and an interactive art

³⁵⁵ Ibid. 303.

³⁵⁶ Ibid. 516.

³⁵⁷ ArtBase is hosted by Rhizome, an organization associated with New York’s New Museum of Contemporary Art. See rhizome.org (Mar. 28, 2012).

³⁵⁸ The church is renowned for Tintoretto’s *Last Supper* (1592-94), lavishly reproduced in the catalogue both in its entirety and dozens of detail images as homage to its application of *light*, the Biennale theme. See Curiger, *ILLUMInations: 54. Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte, la Biennale di Venezia*. 3-16.

experience.³⁵⁹ Of note is the spiral taking form both in the Kapoor and Starn installations. Another shared characteristic is the works' ephemeral nature, which sets them apart from the majority of object-based exhibitions. Both Kapoor and the Starns have completed significant public art projects: Kapoor's massive, mirrored steel sculpture *Cloud Gate*, installed in Chicago's Millennium Park in 2006, assumed international prominence as a showpiece of permanent public art. Like *Big Bamboo* it is interactive: visitors can walk beneath and catch distorted reflections of themselves and the city's skyline in the surface.

Critics of major art journals, from Lilly Wei³⁶⁰ to Anna Dezeuze³⁶¹ consistently pointed out the 54th Venice Biennial's overarching theme of political commentary, a reaction to the Arab Spring and worldwide unrest. If the general political climate was mirrored in the country pavilion exhibitions, this also points to Bice Curiger's curatorial concept. Departing from the 2011 edition of the Biennale and taking a more long-term view, it "is impossible to say anything about Venice that has not been said before."³⁶² Fortunately, however, the concentration of artistic experimentation at the Biennale will continue to provide the research material for art historical discourse and international dialog.

Critical Reception of *Big Bambú* in Venice

Akin to the New York venue, the literature on the Starns' Venice installation consistently refers to the metaphor of change, articulated by the continuous engagement by the artists and rock climbers. However, *Big Bambú's* greatest asset is its experiential nature. But the visitors also appreciated the level of welcoming comfort and scenic views experienced upon scaling the tower, including pillows to

³⁵⁹ Martin Gayford, "Abramovich, Pinault Watch as Kapoor's Apparition Spooks Venice," Jun. 5, 2011. www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-06-05/abramovich-pinault-watch-as-kapoor-spooks-venice-biennale-martin-gayford.html (Mar. 28, 2012). – Unimpressed by the 2011 Biennale offerings, the critic highlighted Kapoor and the Starns in his critique, although he did not establish the shared public art context.

³⁶⁰ Lilly Wei, "54th Venice Biennale," *ARTnews* 110, no. 7 (Summer 2011). 135

³⁶¹ Anna Dezeuze, "54th Venice Biennale," *Art Monthly*, no. 348 (Jul./Aug. 2011). 25.

³⁶² Geoff Dyer, "Back at the biennale," *Guardian*, June 10, 2011. www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/jun/11/venice-biennale-geoff-dyer-author (Mar. 31, 2012).

sit on. Kisa Lala remarked on this asset,³⁶³ as did Beth Mackey, the wife of one of the climbers:

Sturdy walkways of parallel poles (some repurposed from the Met project) lead your feet up and up and up as you twist your way steadily higher – to the patio of Wake Forest University's Casa Artom, then over the rooftop! The corkscrew unfurls 50 feet above the ground onto a wide bamboo platform with tiered benches, stylistic pillows and one of the best views this side of Venice.³⁶⁴

The scaling of towers is a popular tourist attraction, particularly in Venice, because it captivates all senses and rewards the climber with the extraordinary view of the skyline embedded in the canals and the Gulf of Venice. This common appeal has always been a deliberate, intentional facet of the Starns' art, as discussed in the introductory chapter, which occasionally causes a questioning of the works' significance, e.g., by Wilkin.³⁶⁵ I agree with Lala, who elaborated on the innocence of the work and its affinity with native cultures, while reaffirming the appropriateness of inserting *Big Bambú* in timeless Venice.³⁶⁶ In taking this last thought one step further, the monumental scale and temporary nature of the tower introduces the idea of change in a city whose architectural substratum is static, having been completed and perfected centuries ago. The beauty of its temporality not only connects the past with the present, and the future, but also guarantees its imminent disappearance to reinstate the status quo.

Change and interaction promote public and private, professional and popular discourse. Giovanni Carmine, the artistic organizer of the 2011 Venice biennial, eloquently phrased the notion of arts' critical function to touch the human soul:

Art is a powerful tool, because in the best of cases it can develop symbols capable of generating sharing and participation in the perfect osmosis between conceptual proposal and form, an osmosis of enormous potential because it is also able to appeal to the public at an emotional level.³⁶⁷

³⁶³ Lala, "Venice Biennale: A Temple of Transience By Mike And Doug Starn."

³⁶⁴ Beth Mackey, "In the first person: Backstage at 'Big Bambu'," *The Poughkeepsie Journal*, June 23, 2011. 3C.

³⁶⁵ Wilkin negates the significance of *Big Bambú* as discussed above. See Wilkin, "Branching Out Atop the Met Museum".

³⁶⁶ Lala, "Venice Biennale: A Temple of Transience By Mike And Doug Starn."

³⁶⁷ Giovanni Carmine. "Where is Ai Weiwei?" In: Curiger, *ILLUMInations: 54. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, la Biennale di Venezia*. 62.

This sentiment is reflected in the worldwide critical dialogue on the biennial in general and *Big Bambú* in particular. For a variety of reasons, the reception of *Big Bambú* remained more limited than in the previous year. For one thing, the work had been widely discussed while at the Met. Secondly, the brief exhibition period of a collateral event affected the critical discourse. Furthermore, Wake Forest University is not an art institution and lacked the resources of the Metropolitan Museum. Finally, while New York is Doug and Mike's hometown, they are less renowned in Europe despite the Biennale's stupendous international artist and art market presence. Commendable, nonetheless, are Doug and Mike's tenacity and their readiness to be proactive.

11.4 The Big Bambú Installations: Variations on a Theme

The three *Big Bambú* installations between 2008 and 2011 span the Starns' development of their first outdoor installation from its debut in the studio to distinctively different incarnations at two significant, international venues. The compelling question of similarities and differences emerges.

Noticeable in Venice and all three *Big Bambú* installations is the incorporation of leafy branches. These offer visual accents and points of reference in their expansive shape, and also recall the tradition of topping out in construction, a ceremony conducted when the last beam is placed at the top of a building. An evergreen tree is erected at the highest point to symbolize growth and to bring luck.

Simultaneously, the leafed poles imply an anti-architectural character, rather instilling an unfinished and unstructured impression. At the Biennale, the diagonal leafy fronds wrap around the *Big Bambú* core (Ill. 110), thereby inferring the upward movement of the tower's spiraling walkway. During the first iteration in Beacon, where the foliage is woven into the structure, the leaves create the illusion of greater density in select areas to enhance the arch inscribed into the architectural setting (Ill. 98).

Encountering the wispy bamboo tips of the Metropolitan Museum's horizontally oriented installation (Ill. 102) in the setting of the Central Park tree canopy below, *Big Bambú* offers a symphonic counterpoint to Manhattan's dense urban fabric abutting a green oasis. The structure of nature complements the man-made construction on the roof terrace with its crisscrossing of limbs. While the saturated greens of the deciduous trees speak of summer, the pale hues of the bamboo anticipate withering and the approaching change of seasons. Since the color of the bamboo does match some of the brick building facades at Central Park's western edge, the project introduces yet another perspective on the concept of habitat. In summary, *Big Bambú* epitomizes the Starns' ongoing investigation of relationships, change and continuity.

12. Conclusion: Photography at the Intersection of Public Art

As we have seen, Doug and Mike Starn progressed from studio photography to the field of public art by continuously pushing into previously uncharted areas. In their work, the Starn duo has been able to seamlessly connect questions pertaining to the medium of photography and technical or scientific questions with philosophical inquiry. Through their projects, statements and writings they have shared their insights on the nature of relationships, beginning with their collaborative approach, particularly on their special birth status as twins, and moving on to the exploration of religion, science and universal truths. In their search for new expressions they have ventured from the medium of photography to touch the major art genres, always attempting to reach beyond the already known. In considering the Starn oeuvre, three major conclusions can be drawn:

1. By virtue of elevating artistic process to a central concern, Doug and Mike Starn followed the trajectory from two-dimensional to spatial exploration and public art.³⁶⁸
2. Photography is Doug and Mike's original medium and continues to be their leading medium. This principle applies (a) in the development of new work, (b) as a parallel medium to the spatial works and (c) in the documentation of the latter.
3. Their collaborative approach – fostered last not least by their twinship – early on propelled the Starns to leading the avant-garde by pushing their original medium to groundbreaking territory through scale and material choices.

The investigation of light, impermanence, connectedness and continuity has been at the center of Mike and Doug Starn's artistic investigation. Their dialectic method (the investigation of universal truths through discussion leading to artistic outcomes) can be seen as a linear progression, but also allows them to continue

³⁶⁸ Space, of course, is a central concern in photography, as well.

working in any genre they choose, thus transferring their concepts and visual vocabulary in an ongoing intermedial exchange between media. This subject offers opportunity for additional research.

The Starns are part of a growing trend in contemporary art that eschews the traditional notion of an artist working in a single genre for an entire lifetime. Of the artists I discussed earlier, this development can be discerned in the work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Eric Fischl, Jenny Holzer, Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda, among others. How this drift, along with the growing number of artistic collaborations has been instigated or affected by digital technology is a topic worthy of further exploration.

12.1 Photography as Artform and Tool for Documentation

Doug and Mike Starn began their career as photographers with a professional arts academy education. Their training comprised both a thorough technical and aesthetic foundation in the art of photography, complemented by the study of art history and theory. From the beginning, the pair's path was grounded in both areas as they challenged the notion of the medium of photography as secondary to painting and sculpture, an art historical norm still prevalent in the early 1980s. The argument of reproducibility lies at the root of this hierarchy, moving photography closer to the category of prints, another 'secondary' art medium. The Starns discredited this canon by developing their unique, tiled photo collages of black-and-white prints, first evinced in *Double Mona Lisa with Self-Portrait* (Ill. 15) and *Stretched Christ* (Ill. 2), which introduced monumental scale to photography and the notion of the individual artwork in this medium.

With both *Double Mona Lisa with Self-Portrait* and *Stretched Christ* the Starns entered into another fundamental debate regarding the use of existing images in new works of art. Legally, this question infringes international copyright regulations, but contemporary artists continually push the boundaries. Doug and Mike solved this problem by reinterpreting or distorting the original image, thus contributing to the postmodern dialog on appropriation in art. Not only did they

choose masterpieces from the realm of art history, but their inclusion of these works also introduces documentation as a principal working method. Once they began re-photographing their own installations, the copyright issues vanished.

The large-scale installations predicated the need to reshoot the finished works for documentation purposes. Thus, the Starns oeuvre tends to exist in two versions: once as the original work of art and secondly, as a print of its installation. Both outputs exist with equal, peripatetic value within the overall studio work. The format an image is delivered in and how it is marketed ultimately determines, whether it becomes a collector's item or if it simply exists as a record. This decision rests with Mike and Doug Starn.

12.2 Digital Photography as Medium for Public Art

Today, most permanent, two-dimensional public art installations are created through digital processes that engage the medium of photography. Public art projects range from paintings or other genres photographed and reproduced in the form of a tile or mosaic mural to works designed with software, often incorporating and altering photographic raw material. The Starn brothers studied and applied themselves to the classical craft of black-and-white and darkroom photography at the cusp of the digital transformation. Due to their penchant for monumental scale, their threshold to the introduction of digital photographic processes in their work was high, commencing instead with first efforts on a scanner in their *Black Pulse* series (2000-2007) (Ill. 21-25). Upon acceptance of the MTA commission in 2005, Doug and Mike fully entered digital photography, because the scale of the project, combined with communication needs of working with a large agency, international design and fabrication necessitated this step. The timing was right, thanks also to the improved technology available.

See it split, see it change (Ill. 65-83), the South Ferry Station commission by the MTA's Arts for Transit program in 2005 required the transformation of photographs from the *Structure of Thought* cycle (Ill. 26-29) and *Black Pulse* into a 250-foot-long, glass tile and mosaic mural wall. As artists who had a lifelong

experience working with composite elements, the Starns' transition to digital tiling came easily, while the existing photographic material in collage form helped envision the final project for all involved every step along the way.

For *Big Bambú* (Ill. 98-99, 102-104, 107-110), the first photographic documentation in the studio became the key to developing partnerships with venues. The curatorial and professional public art review process is based on the review of a portfolio of existing work. Known as photographers, the Starns needed to prove their ability as public artists working in a spatial dimension. The documentation of *Big Bambú's* first, Beacon Studio iteration, convincingly introduced this new oeuvre to curators and editors. Future commissions will rely and depend on this prior achievement. Equally, all temporary public art solely exists as photographic documentation afterwards. British artist Andy Goldsworthy was one of the first artists, whose fleeting, performative art installations in the landscape became mainly known through the ephemeral poetry of astute, photographic documentation beginning in the mid-1980s.³⁶⁹ What for Goldsworthy signified a point of entry, was a point of departure for the photographers Starn.

The genre of performance art, in particular, has been able to flourish since the general introduction of color photography in the 1970s, followed by digital video. Beginning in the 1980s, artists Ana Mendieta, Suzanne Lacy, and many others since then, have been shaping the field of public art performance utilizing photography. The Starns' Aspen stage design (Ill. 93-97) falls within that genre, even if it may not be considered a major artistic work. However, the *From One, Two; and From Two, One* documentation also nurtures the Dalai Lama's political work and intent to preserve Tibetan heritage and culture.

12.3 Responsive Relationships

With the commission for New York's South Ferry Subway Station the brothers made their foray into public art. The demanding administrative and regulatory

³⁶⁹ Goldsworthy's first monograph, published by the Henry Moore Centre for the Study of Sculpture, *Rain, Sun, Snow, Hail, Mist, Calm: Photoworks by Andy Goldsworthy*, appeared in 1985.

requirements, however, resulted a preference to partner with museums. A strong institutional partner can indeed offer the administrative framework and resources that enable greater artistic freedom and flexibility. In terms of an interactive experience, the *Gravity of Light* indoor installation series and the more recent, public *Big Bambú* projects have temporarily engaged visitors at many levels, last not least through photography. *See it split, see it change*, on the other hand, as part of the MTA's permanent public art collection, offers riders to form their own relationships to the work, either during a single trip or on a daily basis. On a global level and in line with the Starns' central concern, relationships are being formed and continue to change indefinitely.

The Starns' transition from studio photography to large-scale public art installations that engage specialized teams or large groups was predicated by a collaborative relationship they began at a young age. The birth status as identical twins offers an unusual intimacy in thought, most evident in their ability and habit to finish each other's sentences. Based on their personal experience, they developed their philosophy of duality and interconnectedness, grounded in their exposure to Eastern thought.

Beginning with their early work as photographers and culminating in the installations and public art projects, the Starns' have attempted to bridge Western and Eastern culture, art and science, yin and yang. In this endeavor, they fit into a generation of cultural producers who assume moral responsibility, eloquently described by Estella Conwill Májozo:

To search for the good and make it matter: this is the real challenge for the artist. Not simply to transform ideas or revelations into matter, but to make those revelations actually matter. This quest is measured as much in the truths we attempt to en flesh as in the clay we might aesthetically design. At best, artistic works not only inspire, but give evidence of the artist's own struggle to achieve higher recognition of what is to be truly human.³⁷⁰

³⁷⁰ Estella Conwill Májozo. "To Search for the Good and Make it Matter." In: Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. 88

In their writings and public statements, the Starns live and act by these principles. Their ongoing search for enlightenment and interconnectedness, shared with audiences in a thoughtful reflection inspires reflection on the deeper meaning of the world. Miwon Kwon, in her monograph on the nature of site-based art in public places, underlines the need to understand polarities and bridge differences for viable growth:

Thus, it is not a matter of choosing sides – between models of nomadism and sedentariness, between space and place, between digital interfaces and the handshake. Rather, we need to be able to think the range of the seeming contractions and our contradictory desires for them together; to understand, in other words, seeming opposites as *sustaining* relations.³⁷¹

The Starns have dedicated themselves to this syncopated tension. In the process, they have continually transcended boundaries, entered uncharted territory and specialized fields including stage design and community art.

Characteristically, public art initiatives aim at commissioning artists who are open to discovering the process and thrive in collaborative environments. Doug and Mike have been known to be open towards and in search for new, unusual venues and collaborative practices. In a best-case scenario of responsive relationships, developing a project transforms the participants in the process, leading all parties to develop new insights, thus contributing to the ongoing dialogue, innovation and the advancement of our cultural heritage.

³⁷¹ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002). 166.

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List of Illustrations

1. Gerhard Richter. *Woman Descending the Staircase (Frau die Treppe herabgehend)*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 79 x 51 inches. Collection Art Institute of Chicago. Photo by Christina Lanzl
2. Doug and Mike Starn. *Stretched Christ*, 1985-86. Toned silver prints, tape, wood, and glass, 28 x 142 x 45 inches. Collection Stefan and Linda Stux. Courtesy of Starn Studio
3. Doug and Mike Starn. *Macabre Still Life*, 1983-85. Silver print, tape, 66 x 51 inches, unframed. Private collection. Courtesy of Starn Studio
4. Doug and Mike Starn. Assembly area at Starn Studio in Brooklyn, New York, 2009. Digital photograph. Courtesy of Starn Studio
5. Doug and Mike Starn. Assembly area at Starn Studio in Brooklyn, New York, 2008. Digital photograph. Courtesy of Starn Studio
6. Doug and Mike Starn. Mike Starn with Snowflakes Series in the assembly area of the Brooklyn Studio, 2007. Digital photograph. Courtesy of Starn Studio
7. Doug and Mike Starn. Starn Studio office in Brooklyn, New York, 2008. Digital photograph. Courtesy of Starn Studio
8. Jeff Wall. *Mimic*, 1982. Silver dye bleach transparency in light box, 78 x 89 inches. Collection Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto. Courtesy of Jeff Wall
9. Doug and Mike Starn. *Double Stark Portrait in Swirl*, 1985-86. Toned silver print, tape, 99 x 99 inches. Collection Randolpho Rocha, New York. Courtesy of Starn Studio
10. Bernd and Hilla Becher. *Water Towers (Wassertürme)*, 1980. Nine gelatin silver prints, unique, approximately 61 1/4 x 49 1/4 inches overall. Collection Guggenheim Museum, New York. Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York
11. Doug and Mike Starn. *Horses*, 1986. Toned silver print, tape, 55 x 108 inches. Collection Randolpho Rocha, New York. Courtesy of Starn Studio
12. Doug and Mike Starn. *Horses*, 1985-86. Toned silver prints, and tape, 65 x 120 inches. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy of Starn Studio
13. Philip Taaffe. *Acrab*, 1987. Mixed media, 60 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Philip Taaffe
14. Doug and Mike Starn. *Large Mona with Plexi*, 1985-88. Toned silver print, tape, Plexiglas, wood, 115 x 100 inches. Collection Thomas Ammann, Zurich. Courtesy of Starn Studio

15. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Double Mona Lisa with Self Portrait*, 1985-88. Toned silver prints and tape, 107 x 160 inches. Collection Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
16. Doug and Mike Sarn. Installation view of the 1987 Whitney Biennial, 1987. Documentation photograph. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
17. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Sphere of Influence*, 1990/91. Toned ortho film, pipe clamps, and wire, motor, 168 inches diameter. Leo Castelli gallery, 1994 Crosby Street installation. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
18. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Ramparts Café Installation*, Tower of David Museum, Jerusalem, 1995. C-print. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
19. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Ramparts Café Installation*, Tower of David Museum, Jerusalem, 1995. C-print. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
20. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Ramparts Café Installation*, Tower of David Museum, Jerusalem, 1995. C-print. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
21. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Black Pulse 3 (Lambda)*, 2000-10. Lambda digital C-print, 70 x 48 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
22. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Black Pulse 6 (Lambda)*, 2000-10. Lambda digital C-print, 70 x 47 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
23. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Black Pulse 7 (Lambda)*, 2000-05. Lambda digital C-print, 30 x 30 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
24. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Black Pulse 13 (Lambda)*, 2000-10. Lambda digital C-print, 41 x 91 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
25. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Black Pulse 15 (Lambda)*, 2000-10. Lambda digital C-print, 53 x 67 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
26. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Structure of Thought 7*, 2001. Archival inkjet prints on Thai mulberry, Gampi and tissue papers with wax, encaustic and varnish, 27 x 134 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
27. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Structure of Thought 13*, 2001-2006. Archival inkjet prints on Thai mulberry, Gampi and tissue papers with wax, encaustic and varnish, 25 x 134 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
28. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Structure of Thought 14*, 2001-2006. Archival inkjet prints on Thai mulberry, Gampi and tissue papers with wax, encaustic and varnish, 100 x 120 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio

29. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Structure of Thought 15*, 2001-2012. Archival inkjet prints on Thai mulberry, Gampi and tissue papers with wax, encaustic and varnish, 100 x 120 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
30. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Attracted to Light 1*, 1996-2004. Toned silver print on Thai mulberry paper, 120 x 164 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
31. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Attracted to Light 13*, 1996-2000. Toned silver print on Thai mulberry paper, 40 x 40 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
32. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Attracted to Light H*, 1996-2000. Toned silver print on Thai mulberry paper, 40 x 40 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
33. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Ganjin*, 2000-2004. Toned silver prints on Thai mulberry paper, 264 x 264 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
34. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Ganjin Detail (Negative)*, 2000-2007. Lambda digital C-print mounted on aluminum, 120 x 120 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
35. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Ganjin Detail (Positive)*, 2000-2007. Lambda digital C-print mounted on aluminum, 120 x 120 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
36. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Gyoki*, 2000-2005. Toned silver prints on Thai mulberry paper, 27 x 43 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
37. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Behind Your Eye Installation View*, Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase, 2004. Digital photograph. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
38. Doug and Mike Sarn. Screen at *Behind Your Eye Installation*, Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase, 2004. Archival inkjet prints with wax, encaustic and varnish, stretched on wood frame 10 x 55 x 10 1/2 feet. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
39. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Behind Your Eye Installation – View of Nowhere to Fall*, Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase, 2004. Digital file. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
40. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Gravity of Light Installation*, Färgfabriken Kunsthalle, Stockholm, Sweden, 2004. Digital file. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
41. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Gravity of Light Installation with Visitors*, Färgfabriken Kunsthalle, Stockholm, Sweden, 2004. Digital file. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
42. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Leonardo's St. John or This Is My Middle Finger* (overall view and detail), 2004. Steel, carbon, electronic components, 144 x 48 x 72 inches. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
43. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Gravity of Light Installation*, Pipe Building, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2008. Digital photograph. Courtesy of Sarn Studio

44. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gravity of Light Installation with Visitors*, Pipe Building, Pittsburgh, PA, 2008. Digital photograph. Courtesy of Starn Studio
45. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gravity of Light – Black Pulse Installation*, Pipe Building, Pittsburgh, PA, 2008. Digital photograph. Courtesy of Starn Studio
46. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gravity of Light installation*, 2012. Holy Cross-Immaculata Church, Cincinnati, Ohio. Digital photograph. Courtesy of Starn Studio
47. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gravity of Light installation*, 2012. Holy Cross-Immaculata Church, Cincinnati, Ohio. Digital photograph. Courtesy of Starn Studio
48. Roxy Paine. *Dinner of the Dictators*, 1993-95. Freeze-dried food and place settings in glass enclosed dining table, 47 1/4 x 118 1/2 x 50 inches. Courtesy of Roxy Paine
49. Doug and Mike Starn. *Fallen 1*, 2001. Mixed media on found office sheets of September 11, 2001. Approx. 11 x 8 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Starn Studio
50. Doug and Mike Starn. *Fallen 2*, 2001. Mixed media on found office sheets of September 11, 2001. Approx. 11 x 8 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Starn Studio
51. Doug and Mike Starn. *Fallen 3*, 2001. Mixed media on found office sheets of September 11, 2001. Approx. 8 1/2 x 11 inches. Courtesy of Starn Studio
52. Doug and Mike Starn. *Fallen 4*, 2001. Mixed media on found office sheets of September 11, 2001. Approx. 8 1/2 x 11 inches. Courtesy of Starn Studio
53. Eric Fischl. *Tumbling Woman*, 2001. Bronze, 37 x 74 x 50 inches. Courtesy of Eric Fischl
54. Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda. *Tribute in Light*, 2002-2011. 88 searchlights next to World Trade Center site. Temporary installation at the anniversary of September 11. Commissioned by the Municipal Art Society, New York. Courtesy of Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda
55. Michael Arad and Peter Walker. *National September 11 Memorial, New York, NY* (partial view), dedicated 2011. Commissioned by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. Courtesy of Handel Architects. Photo: Joe Woolhead
56. Michael Arad and Peter Walker. *National September 11 Memorial, New York, NY* (partial view), dedicated 2011. Commissioned by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation. Courtesy of Handel Architects. Photo: Joe Woolhead
57. Heins & LaFarge. *Mosaic signage*, c. 1904. Ceramic. MTA New York, Times Square—42nd Street. Courtesy of MTA. Photo: David Lubarsky

58. Heins & LaFarge and Grueby Faience Company. *Plaques for Astor Place* (left) and *Columbus Circle* (right), c. 1904. Terra-cotta. MTA New York, Times Square—42nd Street. Courtesy of MTA. Photo: David Lubarsky
59. Sandra Bloodworth. *South Sails*, 1990. Ceramic tile. Formerly installed at MTA New York, South Ferry Station. Courtesy of MTA.
60. Frank Giorgini. *Passages* (partial view), 2000. Handmade ceramic relief tiles, ceramic mosaic. Sizes vary. MTA New York, South Ferry Station escalator installation. Photo by Christina Lanzl
61. Frank Giorgini. *Passages* (partial view), 2000. Handmade ceramic relief tiles, ceramic mosaic. Sizes vary. MTA New York, South Ferry Station escalator installation. Photo by Christina Lanzl
62. Olive Ayhens. *South Ferry Station public art proposal (left section of triptych)*, 2005. Watercolor, ink, wax, pencil, crayon on paper, 30 x 40 inches (30 x 120 inches overall). Courtesy of Olive Ayhens
63. Polly Apfelbaum. *Millefiori: South Ferry Station public art proposal (detail)*, 2005. Digital file. Courtesy of Polly Apfelbaum
64. Suikang Zhao. *South Ferry Station maquette*, 2005. Digital file. Courtesy of Suikang Zhao
65. Doug and Mike Starn. *Proposal for South Ferry Subway Station (detail)*, 2005. Digital rendering. Courtesy of Starn Studio
66. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (fence design)*, 2005. Digital rendering. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio
67. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (plan showing the curved station design)*, 2005. Digital rendering. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio
68. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (featuring the curved station design)*, 2005. Digital rendering. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio
69. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (floor plan featuring glass block and mosaic installation)*, 2005. Digital rendering. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio
70. Doug and Mike Starn. *See it split, see it change, South Ferry Subway Station (detail)*, 2009. Digital photograph. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio

71. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (mosaic fabrication at Mayer of Munich)*, ca. 2007. Digital photograph. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio
72. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (completed map mosaic at Mayer of Munich)*, 2008. Digital photograph. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio
73. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (installation of the mosaics—Mike is pictured to the left)*, 2009. Digital photograph. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio
74. Doug and Mike Starn. *See it split, see it change at South Ferry Subway Station (safety fence)*, 2009. Stainless steel safety barrier, 9 x 50 feet. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio
75. Doug and Mike Starn. *See it split, see it change at South Ferry Subway Station*, 2009. Stainless steel safety barrier, glass and mosaic murals. 250 feet long, 9 to 14 feet high. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio
76. Doug and Mike Starn. *See it split, see it change at South Ferry Subway Station*, 2009. Stainless steel safety barrier, glass and mosaic murals. 250 feet long, 9 to 14 feet high. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio
77. Doug and Mike Starn. *See it split, see it change at South Ferry Subway Station (mosaic detail)*, 2009. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of Starn Studio
78. Frederic Schwartz Architects. *Staten Island Ferry Whitehall Terminal and Peter Minuit Plaza*, 2005. Digital photograph by Christina Lanzl
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83. Doug and Mike Starn. *See it split, see it change at South Ferry Subway Station (accessible exit)*, 2009. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Photo by Christina Lanzl

84. Romare Bearden. *Untitled ("City of Light")*, 1993 (proposal created by artist, 1982). Faceted glass. Westchester Square—East Tremont Avenue. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of MTA. Photo: David Lubarsky

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86. Samm Kuncze. *Under Bryant Park (detail)*, 2002. Glass mosaic and stone. 42nd Street—Bryant Park. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY. Courtesy of MTA. Photo: Rob Wilson

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102. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Big Bambú*, 2010. Bamboo stalks, nylon rope, 30 x 100 x 50 feet. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
103. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Big Bambú (rock climbers working)*, 2010. Digital photograph. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
104. Doug and Mike Sarn. *Big Bambú (partial view of walkway)*, 2010. Digital file. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Courtesy of Sarn Studio
105. Olafur Eliasson. *The New York City Waterfalls (partial view)*, June 26- October 13, 2008. Four 90-to 120-foot-tall waterfalls installed along the East River, New York City. Commissioned by the New York Public Art Fund in collaboration with the City of New York. Photo by Christina Lanzl
106. Christo and Jeanne-Claude. *The Gates (partial view)*, 2005. 7,503 vinyl gates, with free-flowing nylon fabric panels, anchored to 15,006 steel bases on 23 miles of

Central Park walkways. Commissioned by the City of New York, NY. Photo by Christina Lanzl

107. Doug and Mike Starn. *Big Bambú Venice*, 2011. Digital rendering. Courtesy of Starn Studio

108. Doug and Mike Starn. *Big Bambú Venice (spiral on May 30)*, 2011. Digital photograph. Collateral event 54th Venice Biennial, curated by Glasstress. Courtesy of Starn Studio

109. Doug and Mike Starn. *Big Bambú Venice (walkway construction in progress on May 24)*, 2011. Digital photograph. Collateral event 54th Venice Biennial, curated by Glasstress. Courtesy of Starn Studio

110. Doug and Mike Starn. *Big Bambú Venice*, 2011. Bamboo stalks, nylon rope, 50 x 40 feet diameter. Collateral event 54th Venice Biennial, curated by Glasstress. Courtesy of Starn Studio

111. Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla. *Gloria (interactive installation in front of the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennial)*, 2011. Digital photograph. Courtesy of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla.

List of Credits

Illustrations are courtesy of the artists, galleries and institutions, with contributions by the author, as noted:

Starn Studio: Ill. 2-7, 9, 11-12, 14-47, 53-56, 65-77, 80, 91-104, 107-110

Jeff Wall: Ill. 8

Sonnabend Gallery, New York: Ill. 10

Philip Taaffe: Ill. 13

Roxy Paine: Ill. 48

Eric Fischl: Ill. 49

Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda: Ill. 50

Handel Architects (Photo: Joe Woolhead): Ill. 51-52

Metropolitan Transit Authority Arts for Transit, New York:

Ill. 57-58, 88, 90 (Photo: David Lubarsky); 59, 84 (Photo: David Lubarsky); 85-86, 89 (Photo: Rob Wilson); 87 (Photo: David Allison)

Olive Ayhens: Ill. 62

Polly Apfelbaum: Ill. 63

Suikang Zhao: Ill. 64

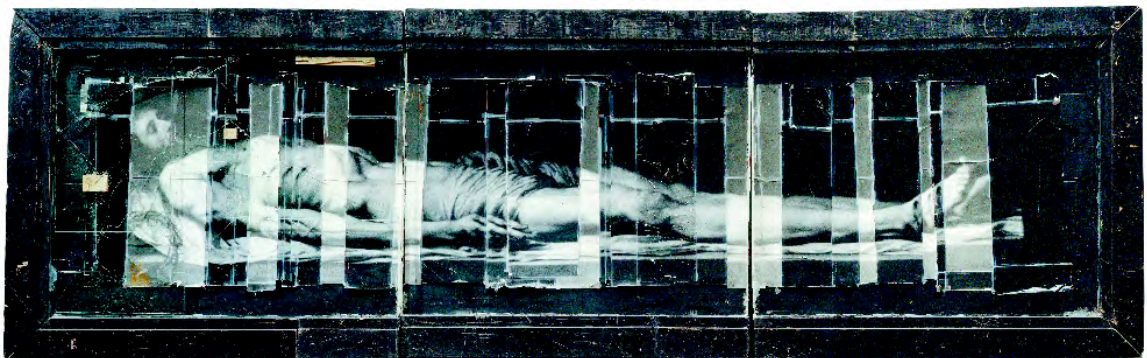
Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla: Ill. 111

Photos by the author: Ill. 1, 60-61, 78-79, 81-83, 105-106

Illustrations



1. Gerhard Richter. *Woman Descending the Staircase (Frau die Treppe herabgehend)*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 79 x 51 inches. Collection Art Institute of Chicago



2. Doug and Mike Starn. *Stretched Christ* (detail view from above), 1985-86. Toned silver prints, tape, wood, and glass, 28 x 142 x 45 inches. Collection Stefan and Linda Stux



3. Doug and Mike Starn. *Macabre Still Life*, 1983-85. Silver print, tape, 66 x 51 inches, unframed. Private Collection



4. Doug and Mike Starn. Assembly area at Starn Studio in Brooklyn, New York, 2009. Digital photograph



5. Doug and Mike Starn. Assembly area at Starn Studio in Brooklyn, New York, 2008. Digital photograph



6. Doug and Mike Starn. Mike Starn with Snowflakes Series in the assembly area of the Brooklyn Studio, 2007. Digital photograph



7. Doug and Mike Starn. Starn Studio office in Brooklyn, New York, 2008. Digital photograph



8. Jeff Wall. *Mimic*, 1982. Silver dye bleach transparency in light box, 78 x 89 inches. Collection Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto.



9. Doug and Mike Starn. *Double Stark Portrait in Swirl*, 1985-86. Toned silver print, tape, 99 x 99 inches. Collection Randolpho Rocha, New York



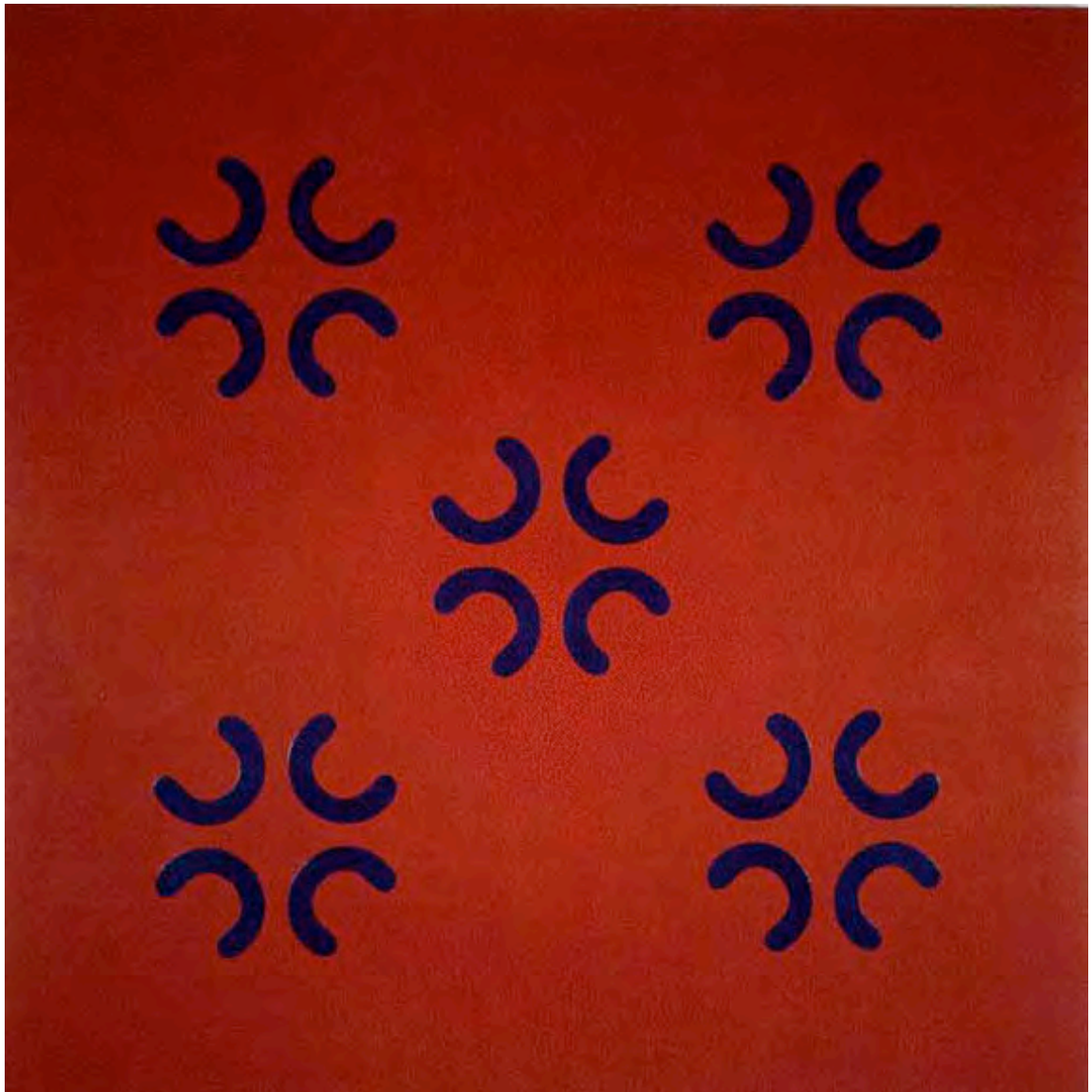
10. Bernd and Hilla Becher. *Water Towers (Wassertürme)*, 1980. Nine gelatin silver prints, unique, approximately 61 1/4 x 49 1/4 inches overall. Collection Guggenheim Museum, New York



11. Doug and Mike Starn. *Horses*, 1986. Toned silver print, tape, 55 x 108 inches. Collection Randolpho Rocha, New York



12. Doug and Mike Starn. *Horses*, 1985-86. Toned silver prints, and tape, 65 x 120 inches. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



13. Philip Taaffe. *Acraab*, 1987. Mixed media, 60 x 60 inches



14. Doug and Mike Starn. *Large Mona with Plexi*, 1985-88. Toned silver print, tape, Plexiglas, wood, 115 x 100 inches. Collection Thomas Ammann, Zurich



15. Doug and Mike Starn. *Double Mona Lisa with Self Portrait*, 1985-88. Toned silver prints and tape, 107 x 160 inches. Collection Museum of Fine Arts Boston



16. Doug and Mike Starn. Installation view of the Whitney Biennial, 1987. Documentation photograph



17. Doug and Mike Starn. *Sphere of Influence*, 1990/91. Toned ortho film, pipe clamps, and wire, motor, 168 inches diameter. Leo Castelli gallery, 1994 Crosby Street installation



18. Doug and Mike Starn. *Ramparts Café Installation*, Tower of David Museum, Jerusalem, 1995. C-print



19. Doug and Mike Starn. *Ramparts Café Installation*, Tower of David Museum, Jerusalem, 1995. C-print



20. Doug and Mike Starn. *Ramparts Café Installation*, Tower of David Museum, Jerusalem, 1995. C-print



21. Doug and Mike Starn. *Black Pulse 3 (Lambda)*, 2000-10. Lambda digital C-print, 70 x 48 inches



22. Doug and Mike Starn. *Black Pulse 6 (Lambda)*, 2000-10. Lambda digital C-print, 70 x 47 1/2 inches



23. Doug and Mike Starn. *Black Pulse 7 (Lambda)*, 2000-05. Lambda digital C-print, 30 x 30 inches.



24. Doug and Mike Starn. *Black Pulse 13 (Lambda)*, 2000-10. Lambda digital C-print, 41 x 91 inches



25. Doug and Mike Starn. *Black Pulse 15 (Lambda)*, 2000-10. Lambda digital C-print, 112 x 154 inches



26. Doug and Mike Starn. *Structure of Thought 7*, 2001. Archival inkjet prints on Thai mulberry, Gampi and tissue papers with wax, encaustic and varnish, 27 x 134 inches



27. Doug and Mike Starn. *Structure of Thought 13*, 2001-2006. Archival inkjet prints on Thai mulberry, Gampi and tissue papers with wax, encaustic and varnish, 25 x 134 inches



28. Doug and Mike Starn. *Structure of Thought 14*, 2001-2006. Archival inkjet prints on Thai mulberry, Gampi and tissue papers with wax, encaustic and varnish, 100 x 120 inches



29. Doug and Mike Starn. *Structure of Thought 15*, 2001-2012. Archival inkjet prints on Thai mulberry, Gampi and tissue papers with wax, encaustic and varnish, 100 x 120 inches



30. Doug and Mike Starn. *Attracted to Light 1*, 1996-2004. Toned silver print on Thai mulberry paper, 120 x 164 inches



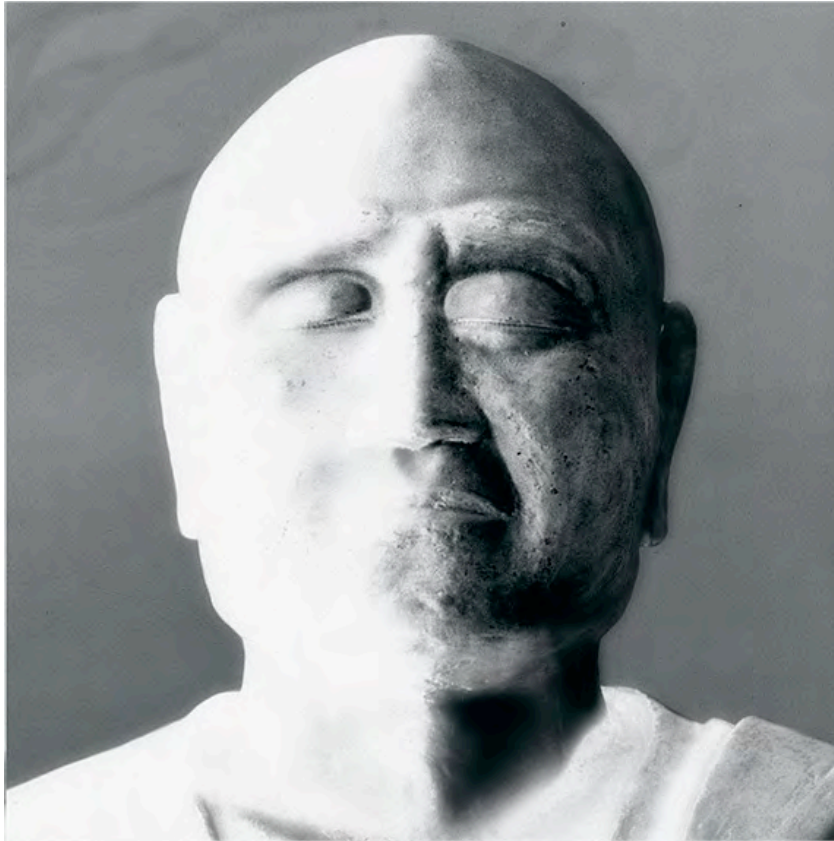
31. Doug and Mike Starn. *Attracted to Light 13*, 1996-2000. Toned silver print on Thai mulberry paper, 40 x 40 inches. Courtesy of Starn Studio



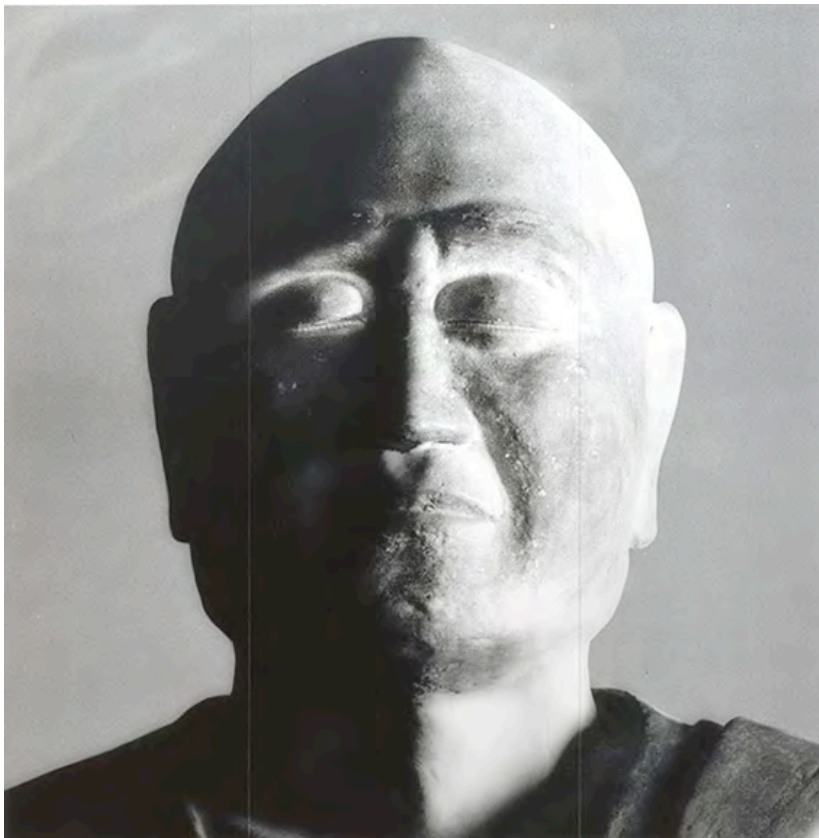
32. Doug and Mike Starn. *Attracted to Light H*, 1996-2000. Toned silver print on Thai mulberry paper, 40 x 40 inches



33. Doug and Mike Starn. *Ganjin*, 2000-2004. Toned silver prints on Thai mulberry paper, 264 x 264 inches



34. Doug and Mike Starn. *Ganjin Detail (Negative)*, 2000-2007.
Lambda digital C-print mounted on aluminum, 120 x 120 inches



35. Doug and Mike Starn. *Ganjin Detail (Positive)*, 2000-2007.
Lambda digital C-print mounted on aluminum, 120 x 120 inches



36. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gyoki*, 2000-2005. Toned silver prints on Thai mulberry paper, 27 x 43 1/2 inches



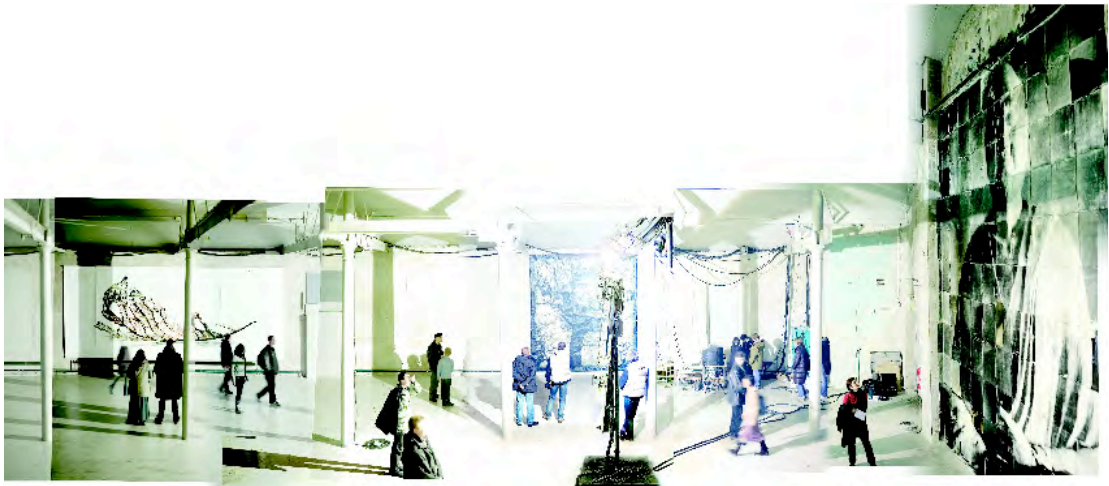
37. Doug and Mike Starn. *Behind Your Eye Installation View*, Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase, 2004. Digital file



38. Doug and Mike Starn. *Screen* at *Behind Your Eye* Installation, Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase, 2004. Archival inkjet prints with wax, encaustic and varnish, stretched on wood frame, 10 x 55 x 10 1/2 feet



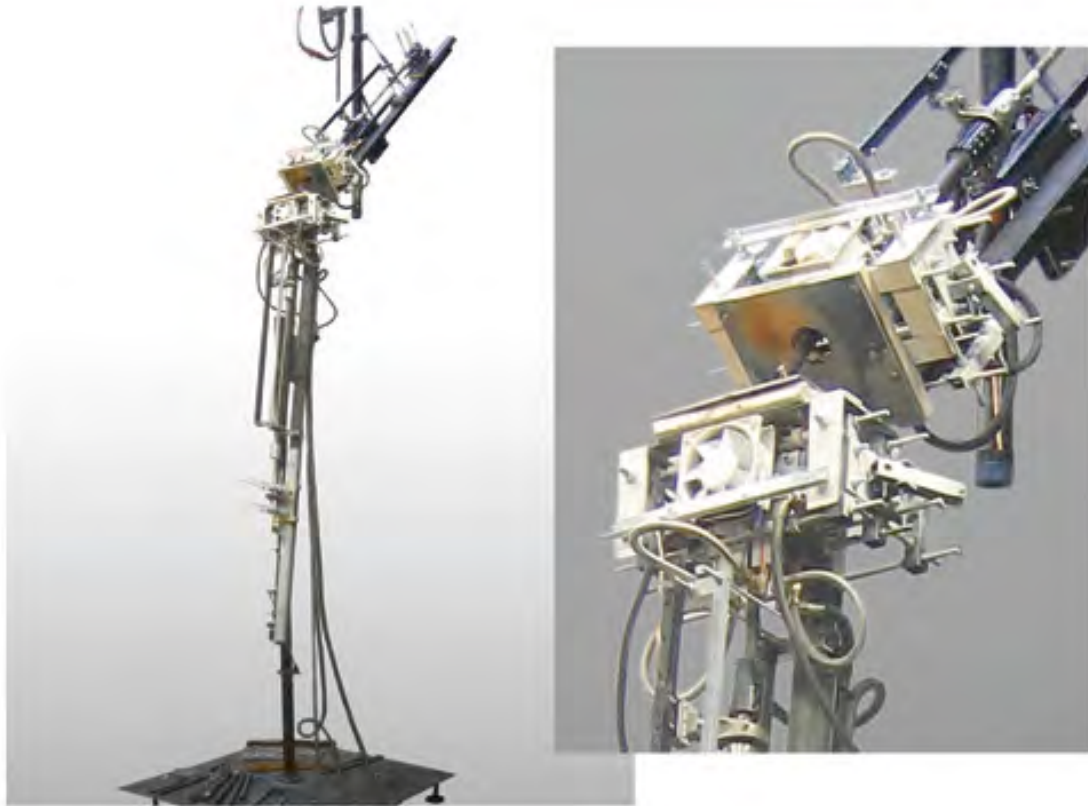
39. Doug and Mike Starn. *Behind Your Eye Installation – View of Nowhere to Fall*, video installation at Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase, 2004. Digital file



40. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gravity of Light Installation*, Färgfabriken Kunsthalle, Stockholm, Sweden, 2004. Digital file



41. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gravity of Light Installation with Visitors*, Färgfabriken Kunsthalle, Stockholm, Sweden, 2004. Digital file



42. Doug and Mike Starn. *Leonardo's St. John or This Is My Middle Finger* (overall view and detail), 2004. Steel, carbon, electronic components, 144 x 48 x 72 inches



43. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gravity of Light Installation*, Pipe Building, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2008. Digital photograph



44. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gravity of Light Installation with Visitors*, Pipe Building, Pittsburgh, PA, 2008. Digital photograph



45. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gravity of Light – Black Pulse Installation*, Pipe Building, Pittsburgh, PA, 2008. Digital photograph



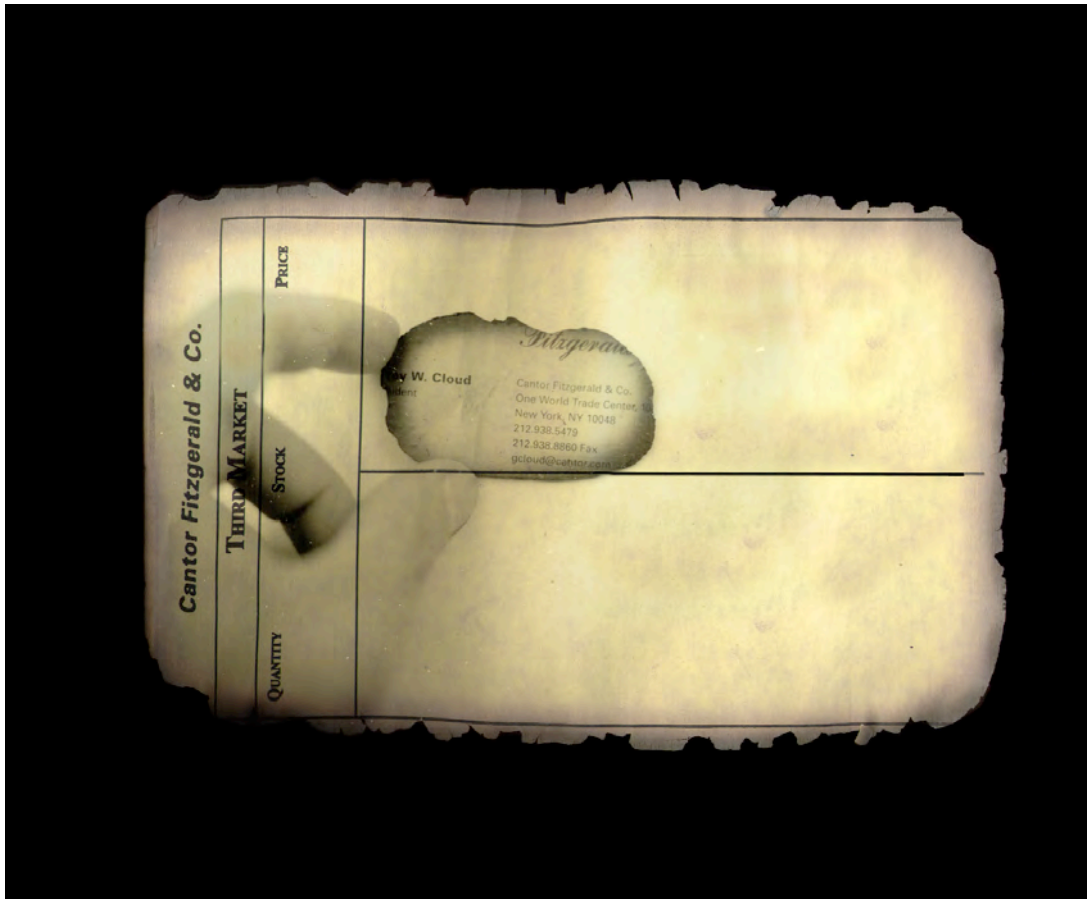
46. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gravity of Light Installation*, 2012. Holy Cross-Immaculata Church, Cincinnati, Ohio. Digital photograph



47. Doug and Mike Starn. *Gravity of Light Installation*, 2012. Holy Cross-Immaculata Church, Cincinnati, Ohio. Digital photograph



48. Roxy Paine. *Dinner of the Dictators*, 1993-95. Freeze-dried food and place settings in glass enclosed dining table, 47 1/4 x 118 1/2 x 50 inches



51. Doug and Mike Starn. *Fallen 3*, 2001. Mixed media on found office sheets of September 11, 2001. Approx. 8 1/2 x 11 inches



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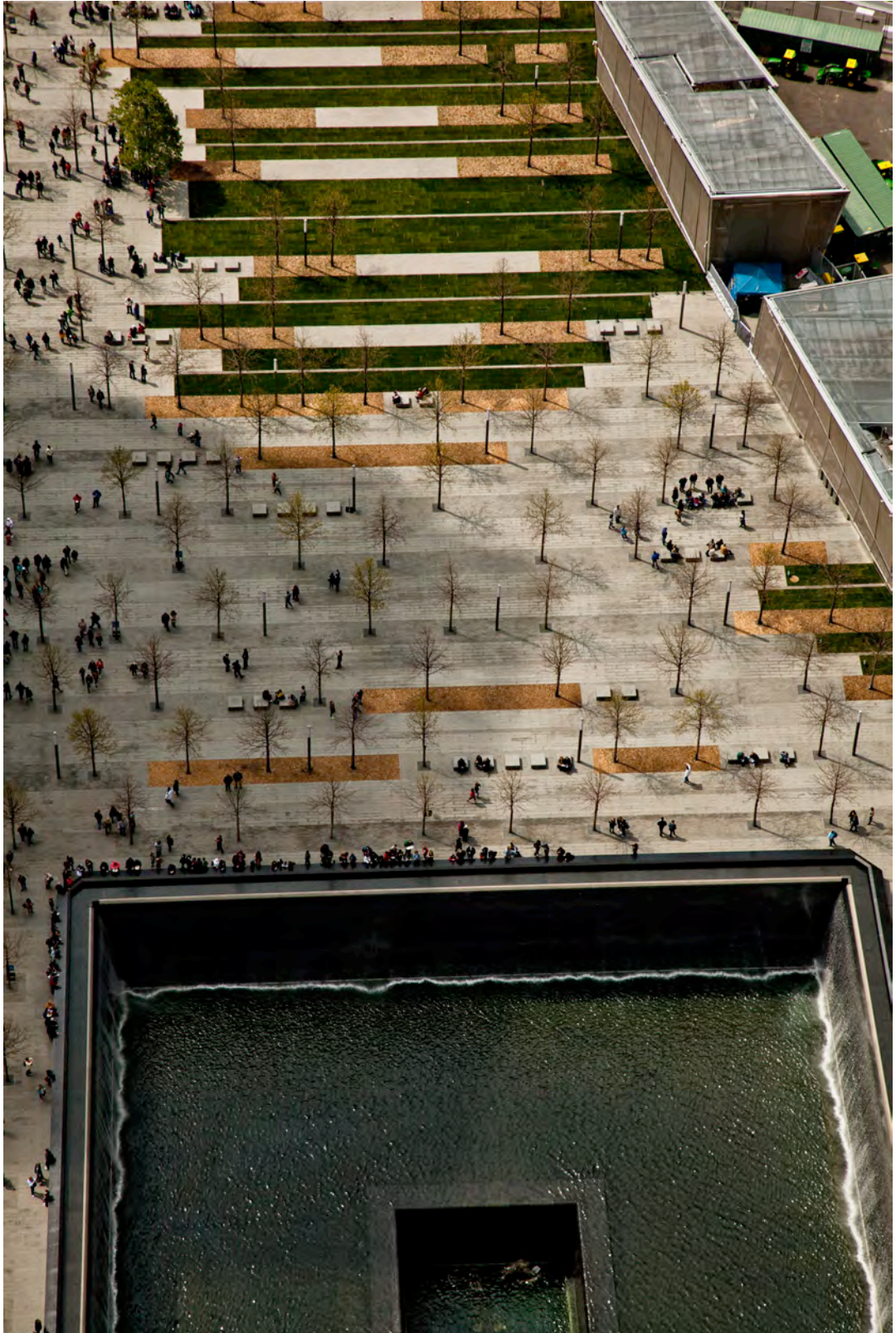
53. Eric Fischl. *Tumbling Woman*, 2001. Bronze, 37 x 74 x 50 inches



54. Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda. *Tribute in Light*, 2002-2011. 88 searchlights next to World Trade Center site. Temporary installation at the anniversary of September 11. Commissioned by the Municipal Art Society, New York



55. Michael Arad and Peter Walker. *National September 11 Memorial, New York, NY* (partial view), dedicated 2011. Commissioned by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation



56. Michael Arad and Peter Walker. *National September 11 Memorial, New York, NY* (partial view), dedicated 2011. Commissioned by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation



57. Heins & LaFarge. *Mosaic Signage* (detail), c. 1904. Ceramic. MTA New York, Times Square—42nd Street



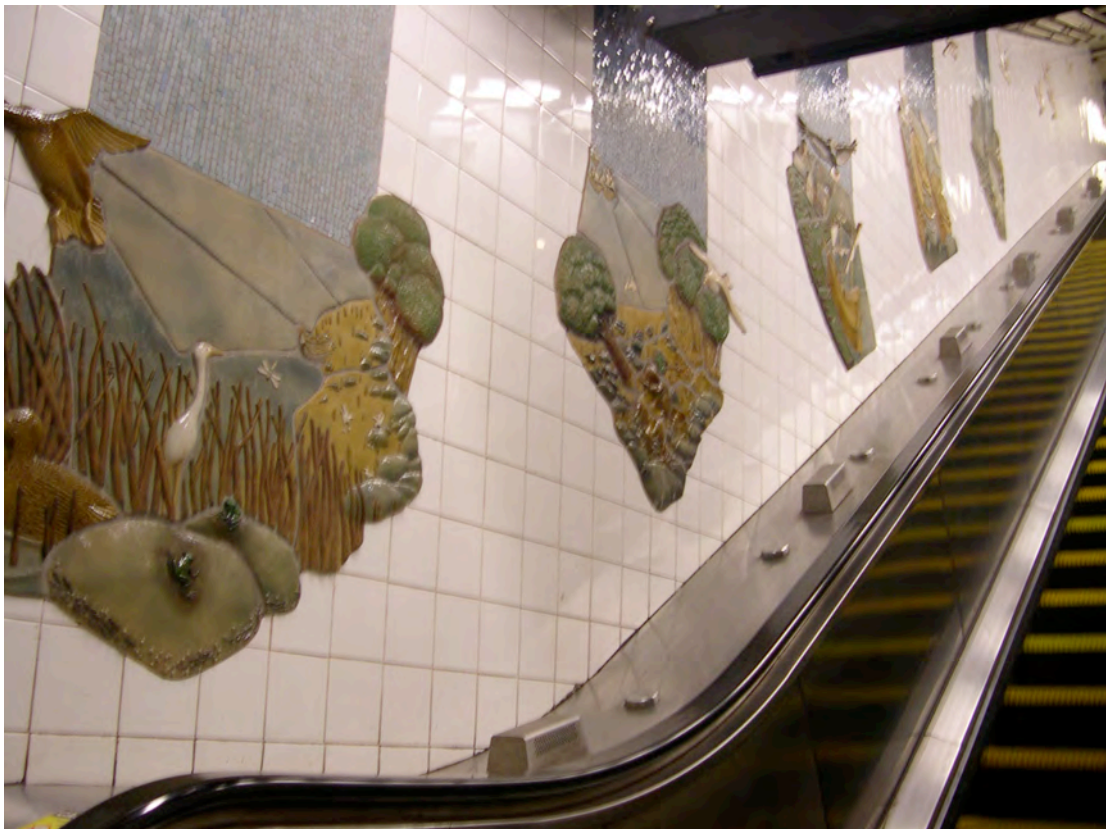
58. Heins & LaFarge and Grueby Faience Company. *Plaques for Astor Place* (left) and *Columbus Circle* (right), c. 1904. Terra-cotta. MTA New York



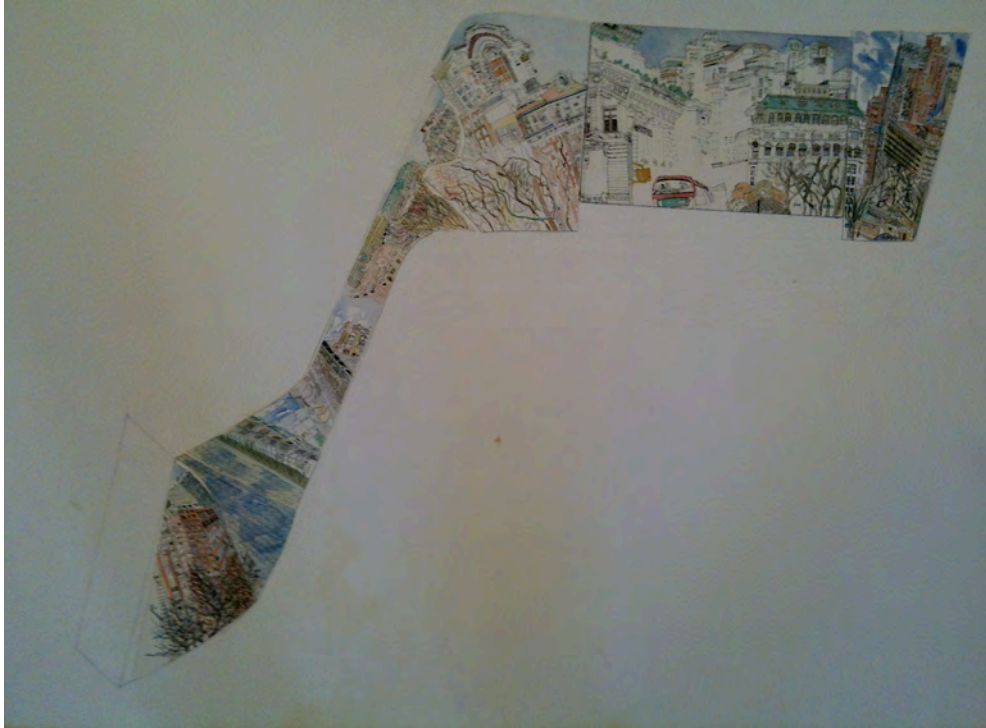
59. Sandra Bloodworth. *South Sails*, 1990. Ceramic tile. Formerly installed at MTA New York, South Ferry Station



60. Frank Giorgini. *Passages* (partial view), 2000. Handmade ceramic relief tiles, ceramic mosaic. Sizes vary. MTA New York, South Ferry Station escalator installation



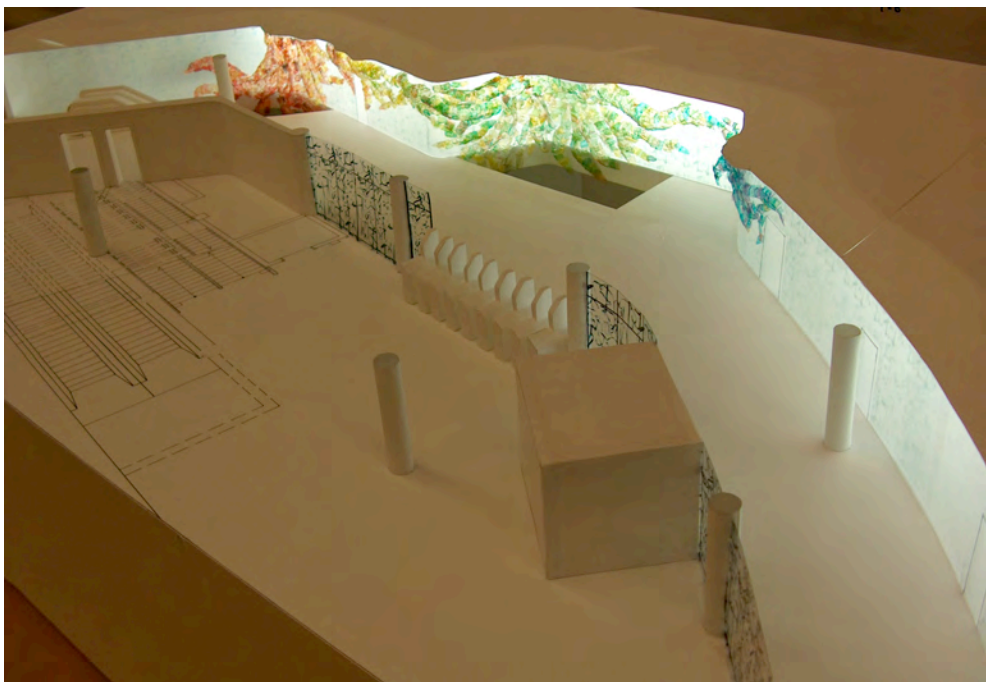
61. Frank Giorgini. *Passages* (partial view), 2000. Handmade ceramic relief tiles, ceramic mosaic. Sizes vary. MTA New York, South Ferry Station escalator installation



62. Olive Ayhens. *South Ferry Station public art proposal (left section of triptych)*, 2005. Watercolor, ink, wax, pencil, crayon on paper, 30 x 40 inches (30 x 120 inches overall)



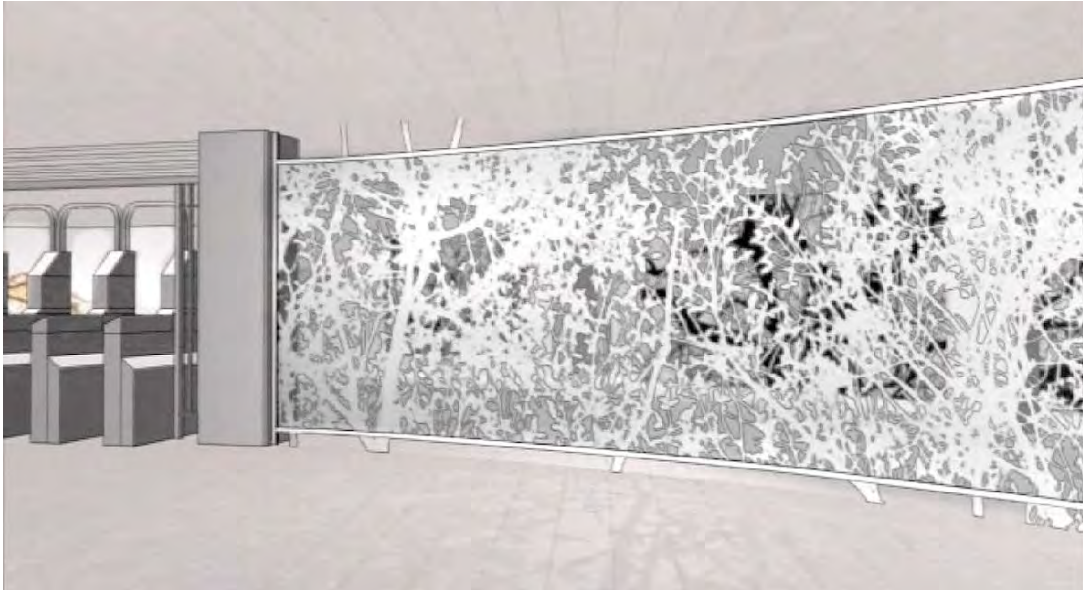
63. Polly Apfelbaum. *Millefiori: South Ferry Station public art proposal (detail)*, 2005. Digital file



64. Suikang Zhao. *South Ferry Station maquette*, 2005. Digital file

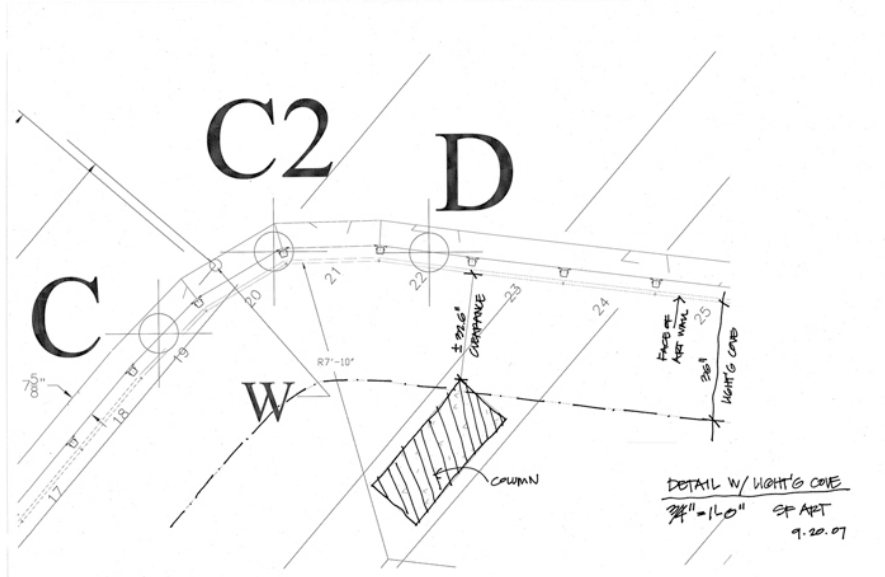


65. Doug and Mike Starn. *Proposal for South Ferry Subway Station* (detail), 2005. Digital rendering

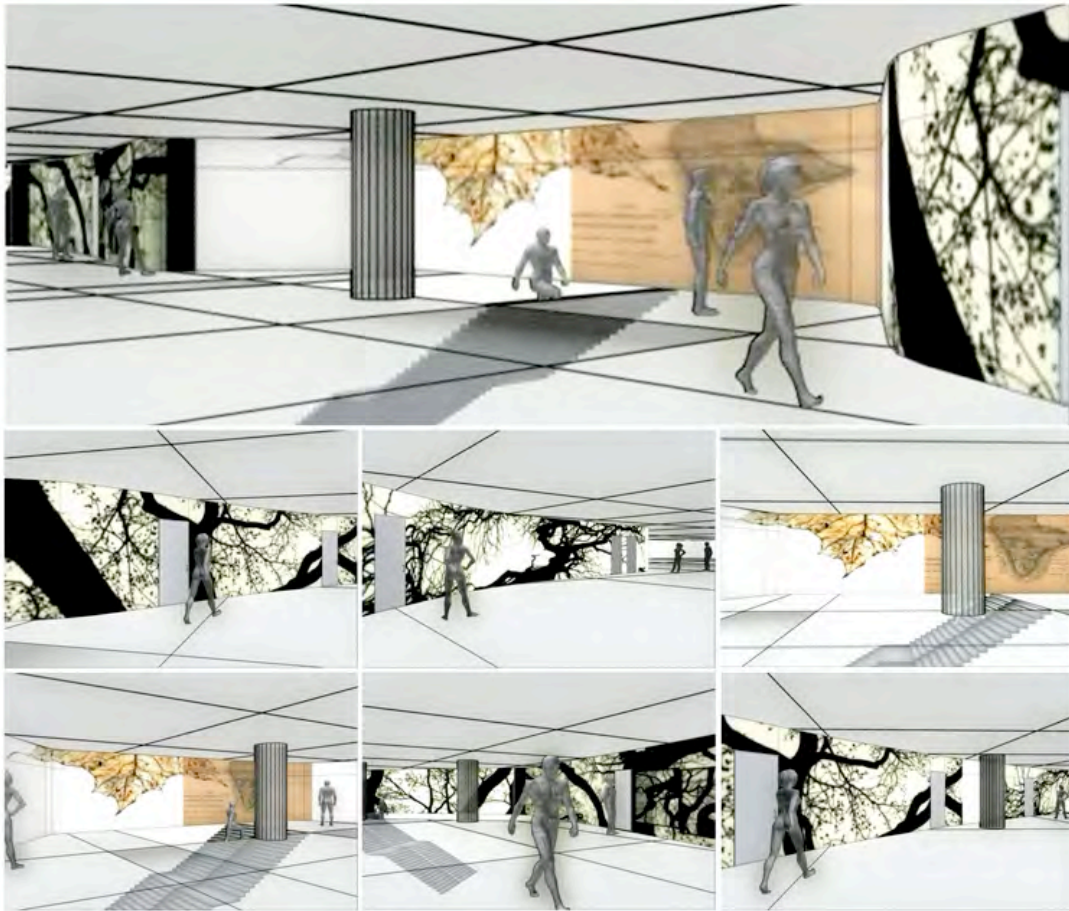


Design for the South Ferry artwork, Starn Studio, MTA Arts for Transit
© Doug and Mike Starn, 2007

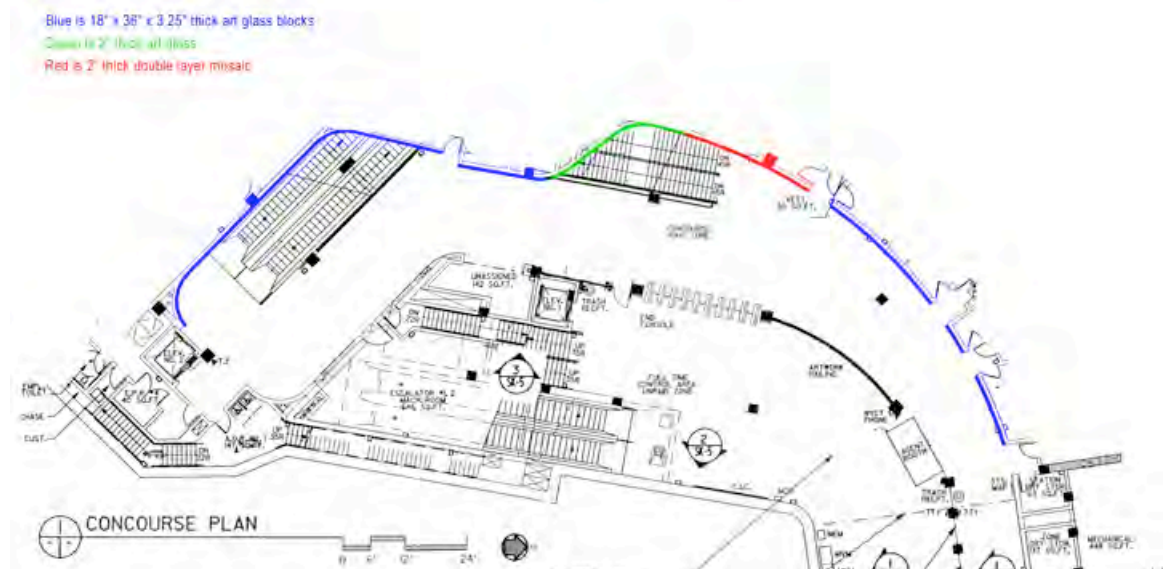
66. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (fence design)*, 2005. Digital rendering. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY



67. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (plan showing the curved station design)*, 2005. Digital rendering. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY



68. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (featuring the curved station design)*, 2005. Digital rendering. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY



69. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (floor plan featuring glass block and mosaic installation)*, 2005. Digital rendering. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY



70. Doug and Mike Starn. *See it split, see it change, South Ferry Subway Station* (detail), 2009. Digital photograph. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY



71. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station* (mosaic fabrication at Mayer of Munich), ca. 2007. Digital photograph. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY



72. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (completed map mosaic at Mayer of Munich)*, 2008. Digital photograph. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY



73. Doug and Mike Starn. *South Ferry Subway Station (installation of the mosaics—Mike is pictured to the left)*, 2008. Digital photograph. Commissioned by Metropolitan Transportation Authority Arts for Transit, New York, NY



74. Doug and Mike Starn. *See it split, see it change at South Ferry Subway Station (safety fence)*, 2009. Stainless steel, 9 x 50 feet. Commissioned by MTA Arts for Transit, New York, NY



75. Doug and Mike Starn. *See it split, see it change at South Ferry Subway Station (escalator lobby)*, 2009. Stainless steel safety barrier, glass and mosaic murals. 250 feet long, 9 to 14 feet high.



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78. Frederic Schwartz Architects. *Staten Island Ferry Whitehall Terminal and Peter Minuit Plaza*, 2005. Digital photograph



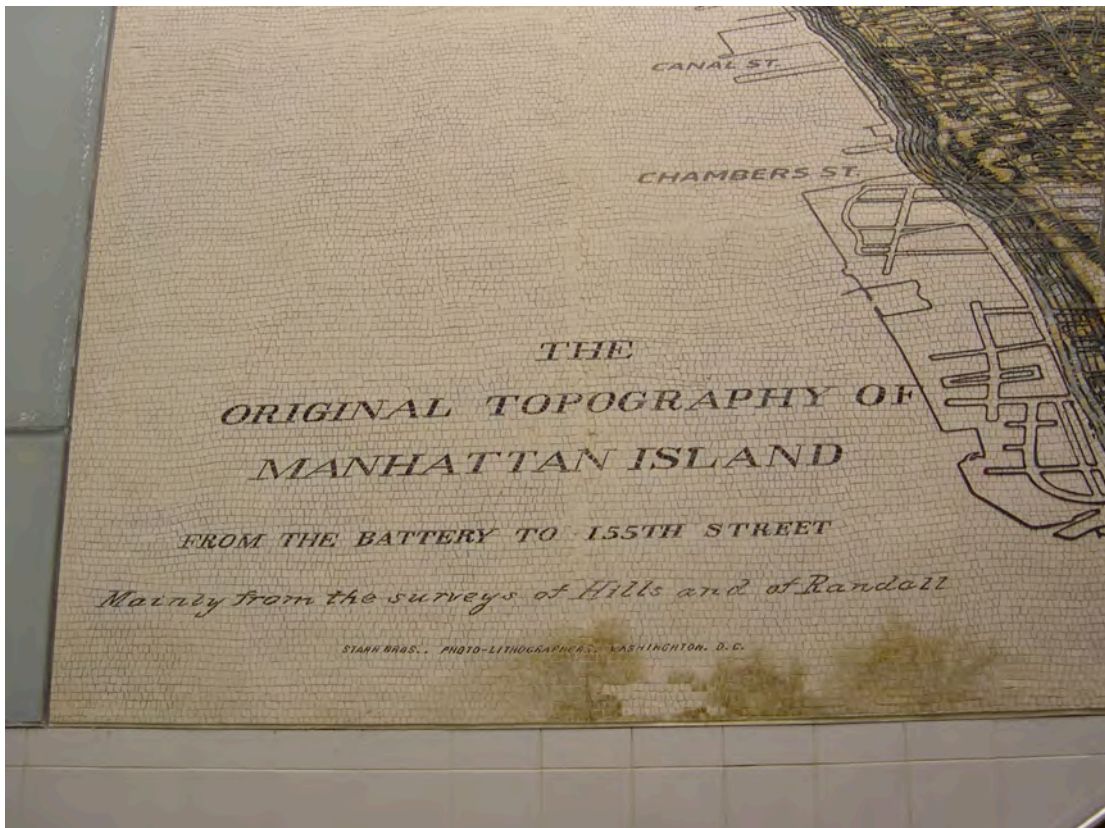
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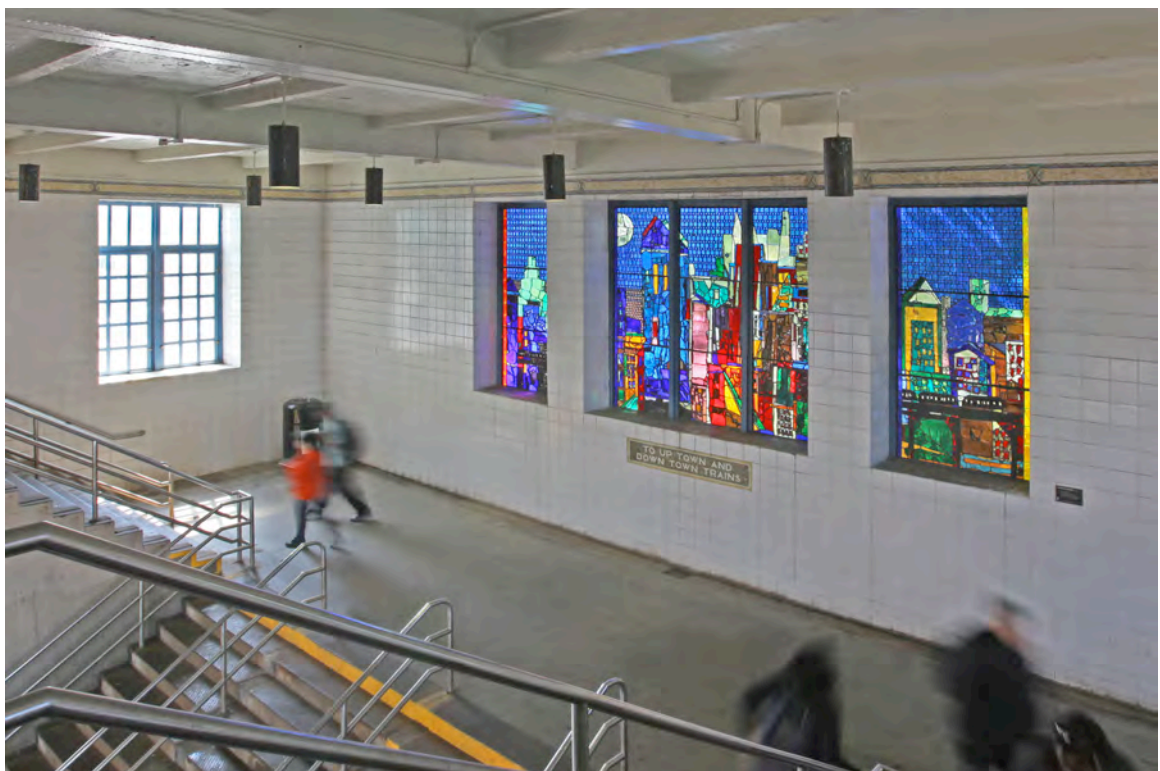
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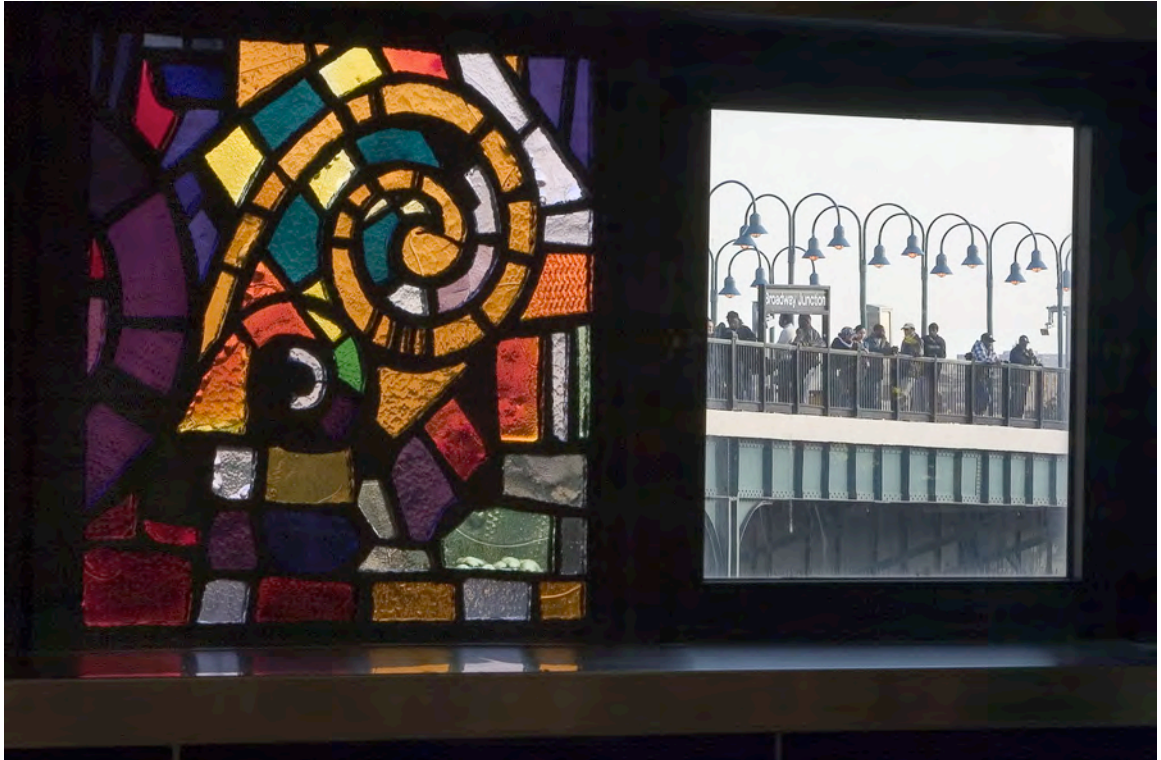
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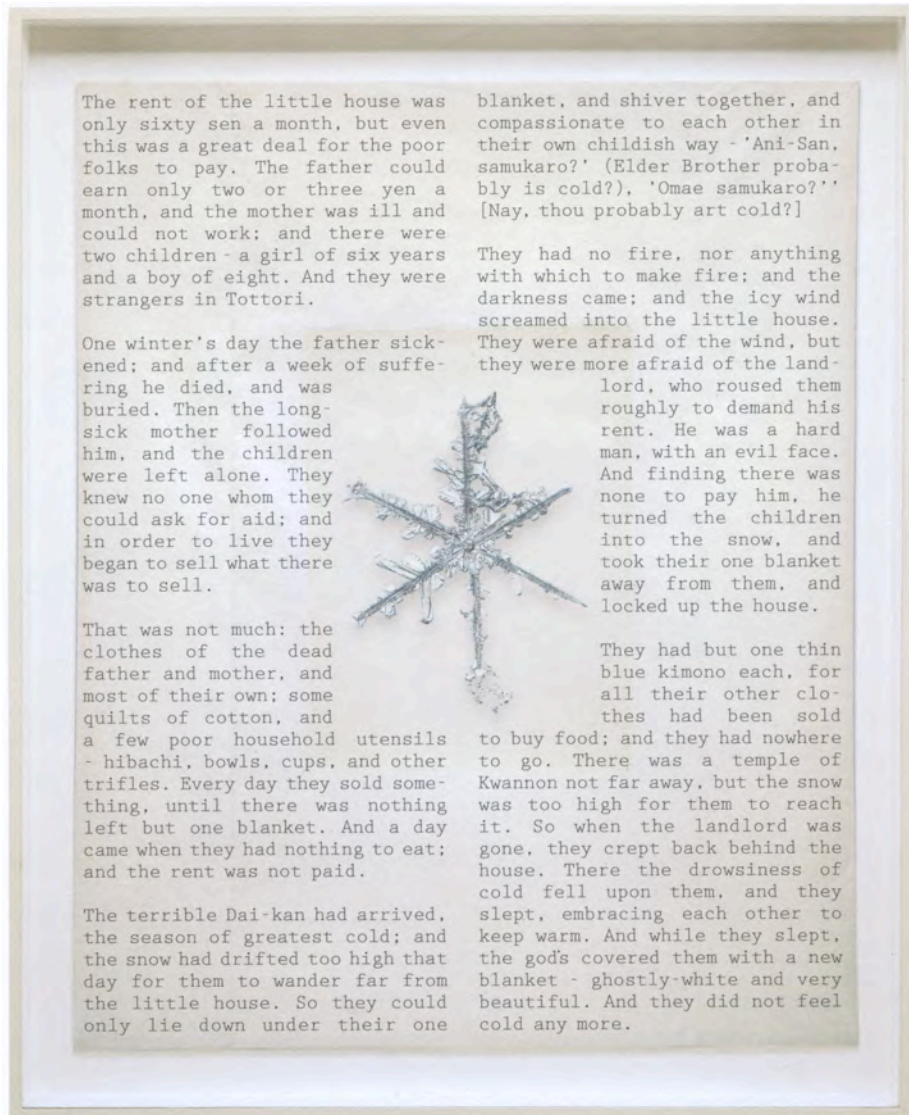
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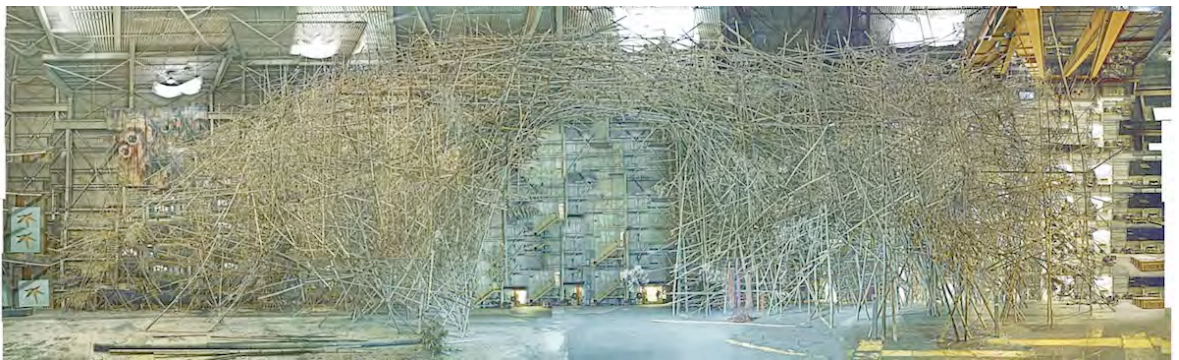
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102. Doug and Mike Starn. *Big Bambú*, 2010. Bamboo stalks, nylon rope, 30 x 100 x 50 feet. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY



103. Doug and Mike Starn. *Big Bambú (rock climbers working)*, 2010. Digital photograph. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY



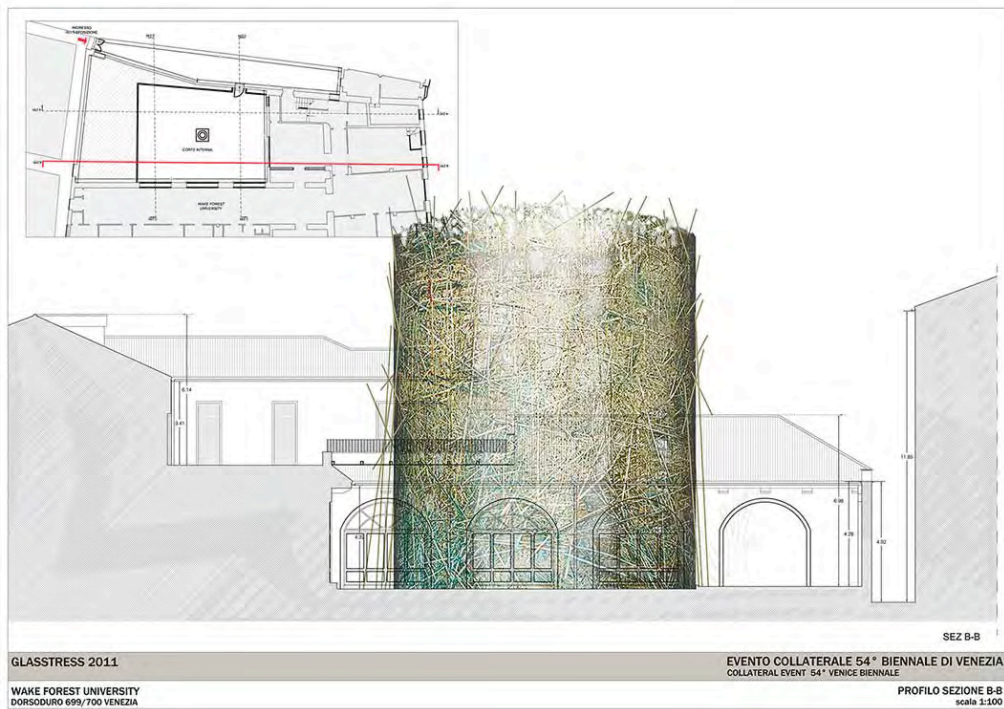
104. Doug and Mike Starn. *Big Bambú (partial view of walkway)*, 2010. Digital file. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY



105. Olafur Eliasson. *The New York City Waterfalls (partial view)*, June 26- October 13, 2008. Four 90-to 120-foot-tall waterfalls installed along the East River, New York City. Commissioned by the New York Public Art Fund in collaboration with the City of New York



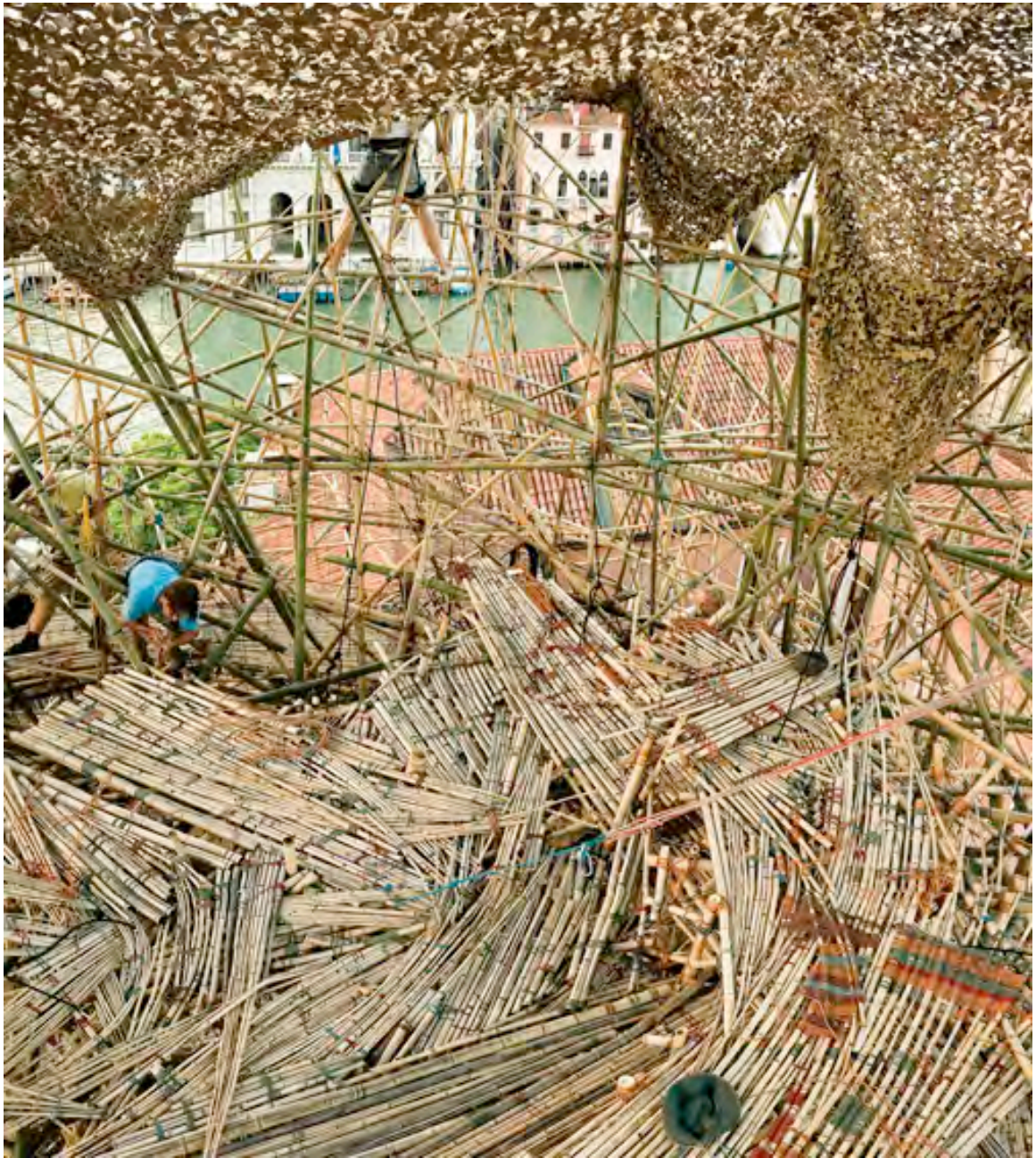
106. Christo and Jeanne-Claude. *The Gates (partial view)*, 2005. 7,503 vinyl gates, with free-flowing nylon fabric panels, anchored to 15,006 steel bases on 23 miles of Central Park walkways. Commissioned by the City of New York, NY



107. Doug and Mike Starn. *Big Bambú Venice*, 2011. Digital rendering



108. Doug and Mike Starn. *Big Bambú Venice (spiral on May 30)*, 2011. Digital photograph. Collateral event 54th Venice Biennial, curated by Glasstress



109. Doug and Mike Starn. *Big Bambú Venice* (walkway construction in progress on May 24), 2011. Digital photograph. Collateral event 54th Venice Biennial, curated by Glasstress



110. Doug and Mike Starn. *Big Bambú Venice*, 2011. Bamboo stalks, nylon rope, 50 x 40 feet diameter. Collateral event 54th Venice Biennial



111. Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla. *Gloria* (interactive installation in front of the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennial), 2011. Digital photograph