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Brian Tolle

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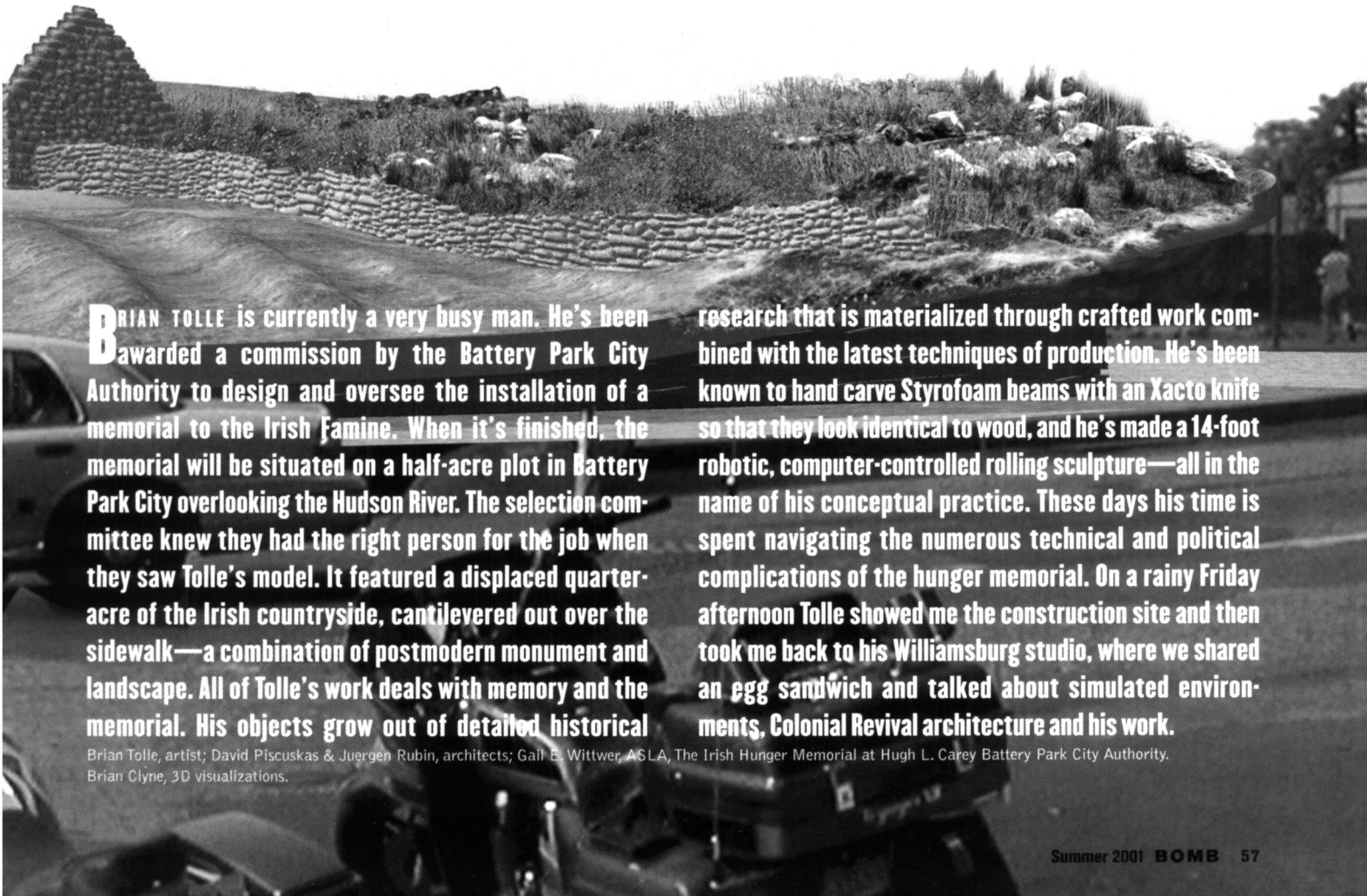
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Brian Tolle

WILLIAM R. KAIZEN





BRIAN TOLLE is currently a very busy man. He's been awarded a commission by the Battery Park City Authority to design and oversee the installation of a memorial to the Irish Famine. When it's finished, the memorial will be situated on a half-acre plot in Battery Park City overlooking the Hudson River. The selection committee knew they had the right person for the job when they saw Tolle's model. It featured a displaced quarter-acre of the Irish countryside, cantilevered out over the sidewalk—a combination of postmodern monument and landscape. All of Tolle's work deals with memory and the memorial. His objects grow out of detailed historical

research that is materialized through crafted work combined with the latest techniques of production. He's been known to hand carve Styrofoam beams with an Xacto knife so that they look identical to wood, and he's made a 14-foot robotic, computer-controlled rolling sculpture—all in the name of his conceptual practice. These days his time is spent navigating the numerous technical and political complications of the hunger memorial. On a rainy Friday afternoon Tolle showed me the construction site and then took me back to his Williamsburg studio, where we shared an egg sandwich and talked about simulated environments, Colonial Revival architecture and his work.

Brian Tolle, artist; David Piscuskas & Juergen Rubin, architects; Gail E. Wittwer, ASLA, The Irish Hunger Memorial at Hugh L. Carey Battery Park City Authority. Brian Clyde, 3D visualizations.

william r. kaizen The early nineties saw a critical mass develop around conceptual object making. You went to Yale and were aware of artists such as Mike Kelley, Alan McCollum and Ronald Jones. They were making art objects based on behind-the-scenes research, their methods coming out of Duchamp but eradicating the Surrealist chance operation and replacing it with this archival, obsessive work—the “CalArtification” of the object.

brian tolle It’s certainly part of my training. But it wasn’t enough; I like making things too much. Craft, for a while, became quite an important aspect of my practice.

wk *Craft* meaning finish, given that craft for Mike Kelley is about the crappy aspects of the home-made. Were you interested in the opposite of that, on some level?

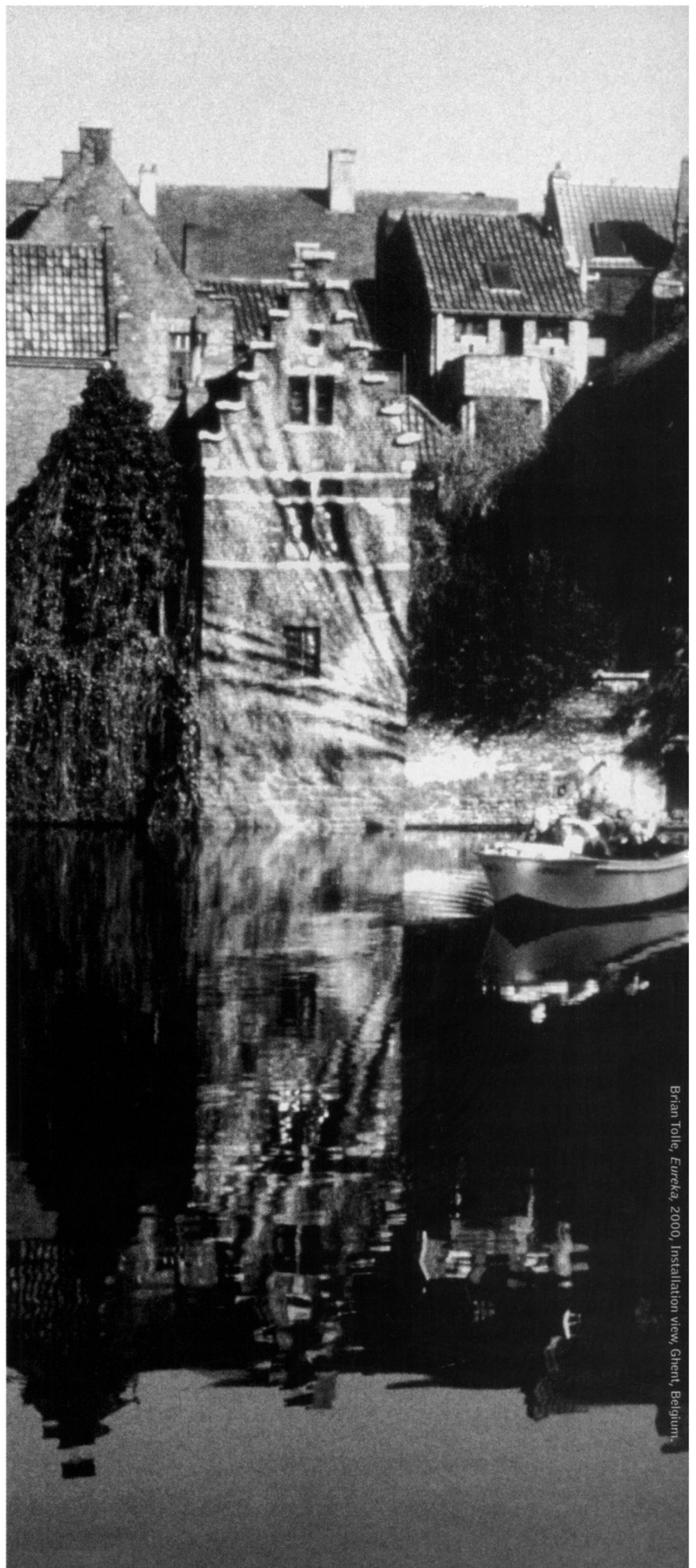
bt Yes, it was about making something out of virtually nothing.

wk Tell me about your piece based on Thomas Jefferson’s folding, portable writing desk.

bt Jefferson designed that desk, and drafted the Declaration of Independence on it. It’s a historical relic, an existing object, so there’s an element of simulation involved with that first sculpture of mine. What attracted me wasn’t its objectness as much as Jefferson’s particular relationship to it. It was a tool to create other works, but furthermore, at a certain point in his life, he recognized that this object would live beyond him and would have value, and he inscribed the desk. That sentiment inspired me. It was the perfect metaphor for what it is to make art. The inscription ends with, “It’s the identical one on which he [Jefferson] wrote the Declaration of Independence. And if politics as well as religion has its superstitions”—a strange thing for Jefferson to say—“those gaining strength of time, may one day give imaginary value to this relic for its association with the Declaration of Independence.” *Imaginary value*, that was what hooked me.

wk You see this uncanny return of history through the memorial running through all of your work.

bt In my first installation, *Overmounted Interior*, I built this complete experience. I was doing my usual research and got very interested in the idea of revival style. Why it happens and when, and how changing attitudes are reflected in the mutation of certain forms and styles. It’s about manipulating the past to satisfy the present. So I thought, Why not get



Brian Tolle, *Eureka*, 2000, Installation view, Ghent, Belgium.



Erin Tully, *Alice and Bob*, 2000. Hand-carved Styrofoam, Aquacrisin, 14 1/2, 10 x 6 each.

to it through more recent reinterpretations? That's when it became Colonial Revival, revised—Colonial Revival once removed. Of course, each time it gets removed, it gets more distorted. I took little bits and pieces that are commonly associated with the Colonial era. Ceilings are low . . .

wk Exposed beams, brick fireplaces . . .

bt There is always a hearth. So the gallery had eleven-foot ceilings and I wanted the beams to come down to seven feet, to convey the right feeling. Rather than lower the ceilings, I made the beams four feet thick—that's how I solved the problem.

wk The effect of those beams was a surreal displacement of something like Colonial Williamsburg, or the faux marbling painted on expensive interiors.

bt I never liked the word *faux*. Like *trompe-l'oeil*, it connotes surface and illusion at the expense of objectness. Although I use artifice, it's not the central theme of my work. It's subtext. There's play with material, certainly, but I hope the work is given a kind of authority because of the attention to detail.

wk You were invited to do a piece in Ghent, Belgium, titled *Eureka*; it was like the Bauhaus thing, artists collaborating with designers. This is the press release: "The project focuses on the relationship among sculptors, designers, fabrication hardware manufacturers, and software companies in creating artwork that expresses the interface between the virtual and the real." What about that interface? (*laughter*)

bt I like working with people and exchanging ideas. I like collaborating. The idea was to try to do something that hadn't been done before. So there I am, in Belgium—I had been speaking with people about various software packages that simulate actual conditions like wind tunnels, to test airplanes or cars. They create a virtual window and then test the resistance and strength of the material. I was interested in software that simulates real wave algorithms to test the hulls of ships. So I found a building, a 17th-century canal house, and we digitally mapped its façade. Then we created a virtual water plane and tour boats modeled after those that cruise the canal. We piloted the boats through the water to create wake patterns. We then reflected the building's data onto this modeled surface. The computer model was then output in full-scale 3D using a CNC milling machine—that model was sculpted using Styrofoam, coated with

urethane and painted by hand. It was shipped to Ghent in ten sections and installed onto the original building. The result is a collision between water and architecture, creating something between the two. The ripples that disturb the façade in *Eureka* are actual waves cutting through the building. I wanted to express something that technology enabled me to bring into real time, real space and integrate it into a landscape rather than onto a picture plane.

wk You've taken the actual architectural façade of the building and marked it with this indexical trace of the boats passing by. It's a virtual brush stroke transgressing the validity, or at least the solidity, of the building's architecture. You've remapped the space of the city using a structure that's an integral part of the urban fabric.

bt It gets back to the earlier discussion about the conceptual framework of research-based artwork. I could spend hours explaining the technological significance of this gesture, but at the end of the day, it's a highly experiential work.

wk So let's jump to your next project. Who are Alice and Job?

bt This is where things sort of go awry. I was asked by Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Los Angeles to do an exhibition in the old railroad terminal, which is an enormous space. I started investigating Los Angeles history and picked up Mike Davis's *City of Quartz*. He makes a reference to Llano del Rio, which was the largest socialist experiment in the United States; 1200 people moved out to the desert between 1914 and 1917. I accumulated a lot of research material, which started to suggest a number of things about the community. [Yale University included some of Tolle's material in a 2000 exhibition at the Beinecke Library entitled *No Place on Earth*.] Anyway, a couple thousand acres were cultivated out of the desert; it's a biblical story. All that remains are a few stone ruins.

wk Twelve hundred people, that's not as big as some of the Shaker communities.

bt No, this was the largest *socialist* experiment in the United States, not religious. Many of these people were European immi-

grants. They were led by Job Harriman, a labor lawyer who had run for vice president with Eugene V. Debs. He had also been a very strong contender for the mayoral race in Los Angeles. Alice Austin, a suffragist and self-trained architect, was invited by Harriman to plan the future city of Llano del Rio, but it was never built. They never got beyond their original settlement. It was a very strong moment for socialism. It's not the politics explicitly that interest me, but the fact that history marches along and occasionally marks something like the Alamo as significant. There's so much that was left behind because it wasn't the history that we wanted to remember.

wk It reminds me of B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*. So, all that's left today is these chimneys?

bt Yes. I carved each stone out of Styrofoam and used them to replicate the chimneys. It's a reenactment of a futile process, an ancient process of stacking stones. Job and Alice are essentially monuments. They are the embodiment of all that's left of this history. A history no longer collectively acknowledged. So I turned it into a story. I decided that Job and Alice were sitting out in the desert one day after everyone else had left, and Job said to Alice, "They're not going to come back." And Alice said, "You're right."

wk So you made up a fictional narrative. You got so involved in the research . . .

bt Job and Alice don't know any other place, they only know the desert, but they've heard about Los Angeles because their people came from there. They understand themselves against this other. The other is successful; Los Angeles, the capitalist model, survived. So they muster up all their energy, pack their bags and drag themselves to Los Angeles.

My Job and Alice are each 16 feet tall, 12 feet at their bases—they're enormous. So you enter the gallery and see Job and Alice standing there, and then you go on to see the rest of the exhibition. There are two more rooms, one with window pieces with typical views of the future city that never came to be. The other with a 12-foot diameter well filled with rusted beer cans collected at the site. When you go back into the first room, something's not quite right,

Job and Alice are no longer where they were. They've moved.

wk How quickly do they move?

bt They move quite slowly. Job and Alice wander the space, they're constantly in a state of motion. They would do the most bizarre things: Job would go up in a corner and sulk, or they'd march one behind the other—very strange, random activities. If they hit a wall or a person, they'd stop, reorient themselves, and then go another way. They have hidden castors and robots driving them.

wk You've anthropomorphized these things—you're talking about them as if they were real people.

bt I never thought that I would. I don't work figuratively. I've tried to create situations where the viewer as figure becomes part of the subject matter. I'm not interested in situations where there's an empathetic other. When you're dealing with history, it's too easy to say, "This is about them, then." It's about the experience that you're having right now. It's about you.

wk This brings us to the Irish Hunger Memorial. When someone invites you to make a monument, it's a very different situation. It is about *us*, *now* but it's always also about *them*, *then*. One question is, What's the difference between a monument and a memorial? All monuments are memorials in some way. Look at the history of sculpture, its incipient moment in the Western tradition in Greece is about a memorialization of the gods, about giving literal embodiment to those mythical figures as a visual, iconic representation of cultural ideals.

bt The early monuments provided places for the gods to reside. There is a relationship, from the beginning, with architecture: they were making houses for the gods. Battery Park City Authority reviewed the work of one-hundred-some artists and selected five of us to submit proposals for the memorial. I, in turn, selected Jurgen Riehm and David Piscuskas of the firm 1100 Architect to develop a design concept. When it became clear that the landscape was a central element in the design concept, we brought Gail Wittwer on board as the landscape architect. I've been using architecture in my work for a



Brian Tolle, *Declaration of Independence Desk: Thomas Jefferson*, 1994, Mixed media. 9.75" x 14.5" x 3".

long time. I thought, Why not enter into a dialogue with people who make buildings?

wk The point of the commission's planners is to memorialize the famine.

bt The Irish Hunger. Hunger is the Irish term for it, the Great *Hunger*. The mission was to create a memorial to the Irish Famine, and use it as a catalyst to address issues of world hunger. Per capita, the Irish people donate more money to world hunger than any other nation because of this collective experience. Ireland is one of the most prosperous economies in Europe. And there's a huge Irish-American community here in the U.S. that's prospered over the years. There are a number of these memorials to the famine and they are almost always bronze, and they almost always represent an emaciated woman and child.

wk That's horrible, an image of what can never be properly represented.

bt That's right, and it shouldn't be. Famine is an unbelievably horrible reality. One

million people perished in the Hunger, starved to death, and millions more emigrated. Its subject is land—not only land because land is life sustaining, but the politics of land. The cultivated land on this site will be a quarter-acre. This is significant because the English instituted a poor tax in Ireland, which made landlords responsible for the tax of tenants occupying land less than a quarter-acre. This led to the evictions of the poorest tenant farmers. There is also the issue of indoor versus outdoor relief. The British government built workhouses, rather than delivering aid directly to the poor. It's the same issue as today: they believed that relief was demoralizing and that it was addictive, that people would become accustomed to being given relief.

wk Welfare versus workfare.

bt Exactly. So people had to make a decision. In order to qualify for indoor relief, official relief, they had to be destitute, which meant that they had to surrender everything, including their farms. People

literally tore the roofs off their own houses to demonstrate that they had nothing. And they had to give up the other thing that had sustained their life—their land. The population of Ireland in the mid 19th century exploded—it grew to eight million. There are only about five million people in Ireland now; the country's never recovered. The people were being forced to cultivate more and more difficult land—completely unarable, rocky hillsides; they were literally pushed to the edge. People brought seaweed from kelp beds and piled it onto the rocks to make compost. These were agrarian people who had to build a life from nothing. They had to make the very earth they needed to cultivate.

wk But this was the heyday of industrialization in the United Kingdom; they were in the one spot in the world that is highly industrialized. As opposed to say, France, which outside of Paris was mostly agrarian.

bt A lot of the hostility that is still very much alive in the Irish-American commu-

nity is based on the fact that there was food. They were exporting tons of butter, beef, oats—to England and abroad. Food was *leaving* the country.

wk You told me that you were grilled by the selection committee about this simulation of the Irish countryside that you're planning for the memorial—they asked you if you were being ironic. How do you handle that?

bt It's tricky because oftentimes I make objects that look like other things or I make things from materials that simulate other things, but my commitment to expression is paramount. I believe in the subject matter first. I believe in the meaning that is conveyed and only use simulated forms if need be. Again, I didn't conceive of any of my previous pieces to convey some ironic message about artificiality or fauxness.

wk Let's not use the word *faux*. If you look at your work across the board, there's a play with the expectations of the object as a piece of material and as a historical thing and then there's the undermining of those expectations. It's not just about using plastic that looks like wood, it's also about this relationship between apparent material and then apparent presence, and then the undermining of that presence, which is really at the heart of the simulacrum. What's different in your plan for the Hunger Memorial is the literalness of the materials. You are going to Ireland and getting an actual house from the Irish countryside, you're using Irish flora—you will actually reconstruct a piece of the Irish countryside in New York. There are two different levels: one is the actual hill, and the other is what's underneath it, the base that supports this landscape. The underneath has this architectural postmodern feeling to it—it will contain text—while the top tries to be as real and naturalistic as possible. So there's another layer of play, of constructed versus real material.

bt Well, what is a true material when you're talking about landscaping? There are different levels of engagement. This is the first time that I've actually shared the textual process; that pedestal, that cliff face, that block at the bottom, is the language. It is the verbiage, the research. The structure is made up of language. So what happens in

the Hunger Memorial is a landscape supported by language. The public relations people called it transplanted or rerooted landscape, but that's also not true because it's suspended between here and there. Not just between Ireland and the U.S., but also between past and present. So you bring something over like a fragmentary landscape from Ireland—it wouldn't have made any sense for us as a design team to integrate it as a park. It's *absolutely* an object.

wk In that sense, it is a simulacrum of the Irish countryside. There is an engagement with what it means to try to relocate a culture and memorialize it. This is the function of a memorial, but this is a memorial that's about the displacement of a population and about the inaccessibility in time of that original moment and place. In the attempt to recuperate that, you're making the past present.

bt People tend to romanticize the past. That's the difference between language like "rugged landscape" and how it translates in the press: "Rolling green hills." The Irish community in this country is a group distinct from the people who remained; they share a common heritage but they've evolved into two different peoples. One group continues to experience the land-

scape on a daily basis, actually using and changing the landscape, building new buildings, new roads. And the other group left at a moment that's frozen in their mind because that's the event: their departure. It's a collective memory. It's an *idea* of place that's suspended between these two worlds: it exists as an imaginary thing here and it exists as a reality there. To bring these two things together is the challenge. Irony is not the solution. I committed to designing a memorial. Before I said yes, many things went through my mind. I was being asked to represent a very complex history by a living public who came together and asked for an artist to express something that they *feel*...

wk I like this question you've raised, of your responsibility to different constituencies: the public in Ireland who stayed, the group who immigrated whose families have been here for four generations, and the city itself, this collective government organization that's representing this event to the rest of the city's population and the world. The other responsibility is to your own sense of politics and artistic legacy. Is it going to be difficult to come up with a non-compromised final site?



Brian Tolle, *Model City (View B)*, 2000, California redwood, black walnut, wrought iron, antique glass, Duratran and fluorescent lights, 51 x 51 x 6".

bt If the site were ever “compromised” it would occur over the long run. And that’s not a question for me to worry about—it’s outside of my control, which is fine. I’ve consciously put the onus on all those constituents to maintain the integrity of the project.

wk To upkeep the landscape?

bt I don’t know if people are anticipating how much this thing is going to change over the course of the year. All these plants that we’re talking about importing from Ireland are indigenous species, there’s nothing hybrid. Beautiful things will happen in the landscape in the spring and summer when wildflowers come up. There are also weeds and thistles included in there as well. People will find logical ways to move through the potato furrows; they’re going to make paths. We’re going to have to adjust to the conditions as the environment, as the culture, as the population comes into it.

wk You’re recreating this living thing and somebody will have to tend it. Are you going to leave the tending to the city?

bt Yes. Really I’m just setting up a framework. The memorial is eventually going to be connected electronically to a library on the north side of the site that will be set up as an archive and research center. It will contribute information to the audio component in the passageway, which hopefully will change and respond to new information about world hunger. Whereas the tradition of the monument is something that is unchanging, unyielding, that continues to persevere as the world changes around it. You know what happens—even- tually people just forget about it because attitudes change, the event was so long ago that it’s just a block of stone in the park. The Hunger Memorial is something that can go in either direction, it can be neglected, in which case it gets more wild. Or, I’m dead and the architects are dead and somebody says, “It would look nice if we had tulips planted there.” It will reflect changing attitudes and cultural shifts. This is one of the oddest things about a memorial project, it’s like going to a collector’s house and seeing your art hanging over the toilet; it’s not going to stay exactly how I imagine it.

wk Do you consider this a piece of art in the same way you do your other work?

bt I think it is. I don’t know how to do anything else, really. Let’s not lose sight of the fact that I worked with a team to develop the design. I understood the value of that kind of an exchange, of allowing for people of different disciplines to come to the table. But the parameters are established by the artist. It’s an artist-directed project, but one that really benefited from the collaborative process. For example, one day we were talking about whether there’s a hill, or maybe there’s not, maybe there’s a cairn, maybe there’s not, and suddenly it’s cantilevered and off the ground. For better or for worse, the experience and the execution and, frankly, the beauty of that experience is as important as the concept. I try to marry those things in a way that doesn’t compromise one or the other. To make something decorative is not the aim, but to make something that’s so highly conceptualized that it’s reduced to nothing is equally uninteresting to me. As far as conceptual problems, what do you see?

wk Well, how is the text going to function? And how does it relate to geological strata? You have text going around the floating base that upholds the landscape and this base also represents geology.

bt Well, it’s only very loosely based on the strata or the accumulation of geological history. That was the excuse so that it wouldn’t become a place for blocks of didactic text. Whenever we think of Ireland we think of lyricism, Joyce’s lyricism, and that kind of rhythm. It didn’t seem appropriate for the text to be expressed in a block form that was definitive and authoritative. And so by creating these strata, we provided 8,000 linear feet of space for text. The text is inscribed in glass, sandwiched between the layers of stone. That amount of space allows for multiple interpretations, experiences, descriptions of the events as they unfolded, presented one next to the other, one on top of the other, one alongside the other in a way that attempts to express the extraordinary complexity of the events.

wk But you’re not selecting the text?

bt The base is the space where many of these different constituent groups can

come together. My role is to organize what is said, to present it—not to say it. Because there is no large space in which to inscribe a complete, narrative text, the result will be fragments of many histories, bumping up against one another. There is an executive committee and an Irish historian who will provide the text. I’m very interested in seeing what they choose.

wk Could you have eliminated the text altogether?

bt There was a requirement that there be a text. There needed to be a place for an inscription. One of my earliest criteria was to use landscape as contemplative space. So I created a place that’s purely experiential; there’s no text on the landscape surface of this memorial. It’s all about place, it’s a juxtaposition of places because you’re also surrounded by all this glass and granite of Battery Park City. The base is lit, and at night this thing that seems rather imposing and solid by day actually fractures and radiates light by night. So the solidity of the foundation that supports this element is fractured, fissured.

wk You’re making the text itself and its variety of voices the foundation of this landscape, as if memory were based on these various voices who are fighting and contesting over history, maintaining it in our minds and informing how we think about life today. This is a function of memorials in general.

bt This memorial has another purpose, as a touchstone for a much larger issue, which is world hunger. Whether it’s a desert or an Irish landscape, land as subject is the point that we enter into the discussion. We’ve committed to the idea of allowing for this to be updateable; there’s a sound system in the passage cut through the base of the memorial which leads to the landscape. It will not only allow for different voices to be heard—we’re also talking about a people who lost their language; the British eradicated Gaelic—so it’s an opportunity to hear that language spoken, as well as Irish music and storytelling. It’s also updateable in the sense that we can talk about hunger as it appears in different places in the world. I would love for this to become a popular place, a place that provides information and a space for contemplation. ☉