Ilan Averbuch:
The New Paradigm of Public Sculpture

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There's a sense in which all sculpture is public art, and in which all public art is a form of sculpture, regardless of how it is made, regardless of the style it fashions. For of the visual arts, sculpture is the one art form that makes its passage back through the looking glass, it is the one that violates the separation between the aesthetic realm and our own, it is the one that departs its native territory of imaginative space and enters into our world, rather than requiring that, to meet it, we imaginatively disembark the here and now and make the move into its world. Sculpture is—or rather, the contents of a work of sculpture, the things and events depicted, the tale being told, are—physically real. A sculpture of a person is literally real in the very sense that a person is literally real. All the other visual arts depict, convey simulations, merely appear. But sculpture does not seem—it is.

Sculpture emerges. It enters the public sphere. And so sculpture is the art that has taken on public functions. It has borne social responsibilities. It is a social signifier—it gestures to a body of people, it marks moments of significance to them. We have used sculpture to celebrate our triumphs, to mourn our dead, to memorialize our losses, to sanctify our battlefields, to commemorate our ambitions, and perhaps above all, to assert our urge to monumentality, to testify our glory. The monuments that pock the passing of every civilization are acts of sculpture.

But ours is not a time for public commemorations—not in the traditional sense and not to the degree it has been done before us. We seem not to be so inclined as a social body—perhaps more to the point, we seem not to be so much a social body any longer. The unified spirit that underlies celebration of victory in war, memorializing of heroes in battle, recognition of our joint aspirations, our common tragedies, appears not to be among us any longer.

Sculpture and its inherency as our public art form of course continues, as art forms must and do, seeking in the works of the most prolific and imaginative practitioners new formulas, new principles of a renewed pertinence, new ways of recording, even creating, what is significant to their time. The project of seeking a new role for sculpture, a function to replace the purposes of commemoration and monumentality, can be said to have been in progress ever since Rodin, and in particular since his *Burghers of Calais*, a commemorative work of distinctly introverted gazes, a work of heroic acknowledgement not elevated and celebratory, but turned inward, away from the public realm.

In our time, the development of new formulas and fashions continues in the works of the most prolific and effective sculptors, and in the most overtly public work, there are few sculptors who are more present in the contemporary cultural environment than Ilan Averbuch. Over his 30-year-long career, Averbuch has become one of our most successful public sculptors. His works appear over a great part of the globe, including India, Israel, Poland, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, and many parts of the United States.

And Averbuch is one of our most effective public sculptors in a sense far more significant—in the sense of pure aesthetics: he has developed a manner of sculpture, a style of conception and execution, that is distinctly his own, and that is distinctly suited to the nature of public projects, distinctly and deliberately suited to solving the conundrum of public projects done in a time of withdrawn public sentiment—the conundrum since the time of Rodin. In short, he has developed a new paradigm for public sculpture, a new model of public works tailored to our moment in history.

It is not merely that Averbuch works in forms and with materials that are unmistakably his own. There is that, but there is more: he works in a style, with a feeling of

personal identity, that is his own. One can never mistake an Averbuch sculpture for that of anyone else, not merely because of its forms and combinations of forms, but for the fluid movement of thought, the personality, the character of dreaming, that laces through all his acts of creation. They do not merely look like no one else's; they feel like no one else's.

What Averbuch has achieved in his personal style, and what no other contemporary sculptor has done to anywhere near the same degree, is fuse together the visual linguistics of public presentation with the private imaginative formulations of pure aesthetic investigation. In a phrase, he creates public works that replace commemoration with rumination, with pure, free-roaming imaginative speculation, without sacrificing the public role each work plays. His sculptures are assertively personal exercises of creative thought, employing a set of idiomatic forms and symbols of his own devising, and yet they are not hermetic. At the same time as they are entirely personal, they are also highly and surprisingly accessible to the general viewer, as is evident from their popularity and the number of public commissions he continues to obtain. The sculptures are austere in their reserve, in the purity with which they speak Averbuch's private artistic vocabulary, and yet they are inviting to the viewer—more than inviting, they are prepossessing. There is a rich, intellectually compelling component to his sculpture, and there is also a sense in which they are immediately and inescapably likable, which is no small thing for any artist.

In essence, what Averbuch has done is conduct the artist's private imaginative journey—the artist's inner journey—in the territory that the public sculptor had occupied for the sake of practicing public commemorative functions. He tells his personal story, the story of the travels of his imagination, the story of his mind, in place of the society's story. In a sense, he has pulled the Alice in Wonderland aesthetic realm even further back through the looking glass, back into our realm, than sculpture normally does. He has drawn the artist's mental sketch pad, the artist's exercises of sheer artistic dreaming, into our world, as physically real elements, as real as we are. Despite the fact that, by their scale and placement, Averbuch's public sculptures are monuments, there is something evidently intimate about them. The sculptor acknowledged as much in the title of a 2008 exhibition at the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York: "Ilan Averbuch: Intimate Monuments." And he has noted that: "All my works are a dialogue between the intimate and the monumental. They are monumental, but with a question mark."

And yet it is not accurate to say that the public function of social cohesion has been replaced by the artist's private visual ruminations in Averbuch's works. These public sculptures of private vocabulary achieve both. They do the public sculptor's work—of integrating his creations with the already existing, surrounding environment, acknowledging, complementing, and reflecting it, even commemorating it in a sense, rather than imposing upon it. And at the same time, Averbuch's sculptures explore the personal concerns of the artist, concerns that turn out to address issues of social import, of public concern, issues such as political conflict, the possibilities of optimism, war, Modernist aesthetics, the failure of the utopian ideal and the impossibility of the monumental vision.

One becomes fluent in Averbuch's private artistic vocabulary, in the personally devised meanings of his forms, through gaining familiarity with his works. One learns their meanings, and their principles of meaning, by looking. The best place to begin is with a sculpture that, better than any other, powerfully and purely demonstrates the workings of his artistic vocabulary, and for that reason is ideally titled: his stunning and impeccably conceived *Self-Portrait*, 2008.

Standing 12 feet high, *Self-Portrait* is a concise and inspired statement of the artist's methods and themes. The work is constructed out of panes of frosted glass arranged as a conic section, rising from a cylindrical metal base, fanning upwards like a tree and set in an enormous rectangular lead frame that stands off balance, one corner of the frame seeming to jut into the floor. The image within the frame is fragility set within hard substance, with the panes of glass, the fragments of glass, displaying the shadows of the metal armature that holds them in

place, like a skeleton showing through the skin—the limpid, translucent delicacy of glass enclosed in and upheld by the endurance of metal. The work resembles a cameo conceived on a looming scale, but the portrait—the precious image that we traditionally display on walls and hold in lockets—would normally be set in a gold frame. Here, the fragile intimacy is undercut with a frame of lead, a grey, dull, and poisonous metal. It is a portrait of the artist—"Ilan" is Hebrew for "tree"—as conceived by the artist, and it is specifically the self-portrait of a sculptor. The image bursts its frame, literally cutting into and through the frame on one side—like all sculpture, it is public, it is physically real. Unlike painting, it extends beyond the protected space within the frame, extends into the world, into our space. And what extends is not just an abstracted organic image, a tree image, but is as much the form of a fountain, a geyser, an upward surging, of energy, of creative imagination, of the thrust and enthusiasm—the *élan*—of the creator: the creative vision, the sheer urgency to create, to make something real, rising like a fountain, breaking through its limits, becoming itself something real.

It is a private image, a personal, idiosyncratic visual expression of the artist contemplating, presenting, himself. Yet, in a related work, we can see a similar image functioning in the public sphere, doing the intricate work of contemporary public sculpture.

Under the Shadow of a Big Tree, 2009, is a commemorative work, located in Tephford Park, in Tamarac, Florida. The composition is nearly the same, but has been altered in significant ways, to acknowledge knowingly the space it occupies and to pursue the public purpose of its creation. First, the materials have been changed. The fragile glass of the tree form in *Self-Portrait* has been replaced with stone here, to add the durability a public sculpture requires to exist in the world. The rectangular frame has now become an oval one, to react to and establish a dynamic tension with the circular space in which the sculpture is placed. The frame that had been the cameo setting for his self-portrait is here a frame for views of the canal, the park, and the buildings in the surrounding area. Like many of Averbuch's public works, the sculpture serves as a gateway or an entry point that brings people into and integrates them with the surrounding environment. The tree form that in *Self-Portrait* had been the center of the artist's self image is here a clear reference to the tree of life, a commemoration in a place dedicated to Deputy Brian Tephford, a police officer who gave his life in the line of duty. A composition that in one work serves as a reference to the artist who created it—a completely private image—here serves as an acknowledgement of the death of another, of the other.

Among the most interesting and ingenious strategies for integrating his public sculpture into its environment are his works at railroad stations: at Tacoma, Washington, and Phoenix, Arizona. Both projects are constructed of two works, and are devised to reflect and respond to, not only the immediate environment, but the history of the place where they are situated, as if they naturally arose and at the same time deliberately responded to the identity of their geography.

At the South Tacoma Station, the project includes *South Tacoma*, 2008, and *End of the Line*, 2008. Tacoma's architecture is marked by the use of rolling arches—the original train station (now the U.S. Court House) has them, as does the history museum. In *South Tacoma*, situated at the north end of the station, Averbuch turned the form of the arches upside down to fashion two Corten steel wheels, similar to the steel wheels of railroad trains, as well as creating circular arches to serve as a gateway to the station. Each of the sculpture's wheels is crossed by a stone band that hovers in the air like railroad ties suspended upside down, above the earth, made light, ephemeral, dream-like, magical. Like the stone work in almost all of Averbuch's sculptures, the stone bands are constructed out of stones previously used, stones from old buildings in this case. Averbuch has said he finds recycled stones visually more interesting than new stone. He knows also that old stones root his works to the ground on which they are situated. They refer to the past of their place; they are literally built of it. The use of old stones is continued in *End of the Line*, a curving granite ribbon that is buried in the concrete train platform, runs the length of it, and leads visitors into the south entrance of the station. The end of the granite ribbon rises up out

of the concrete and takes the form of a large hemispheric granite stone. Like the circular cut of the giant steel wheels, the curving rhythms of the granite ribbon are like the harmonic rhythms of train travel itself, and the granite stone hemisphere rising up is the end of the motion, the completion of the journey at the station.

The principal work in Phoenix, *Landmark (The Crossing),* 2008, employs a single, large circle, this time of stone. It is a gateway made of desert stones, an entry to the place. A complete circle, it reflects the light rail system at the station—a place where travel never completely ceases. And, reflective of the history of the place, like a gateway that passes us back in time, the circle refers to the Hopi Indian belief that life is a circle that each of us enters at a different point. Apparently stepping through the circle is a line of tall steel stanchions, each topped with a block of desert stone, perhaps a line of people passing the gate, perhaps those who once came to cultivate the land, perhaps stalks of grain being shipped out by rail.

Landmark (The Crossing) is complemented by a small work, *Trough, Seat, and Tree*, 2008—actually, two copies of the sculpture, one on the north platform, one on the south. The composition is of a line of granite stones, with a trough carved along the top of them, which intersects with a concrete seat, forming a corner that embraces a triangular planter, which holds vegetation and a large shade tree. At regular intervals, water flows through the trough, dripping close to the tree and watering the vegetation. More than a decorative work, the sculpture is a resting place for travelers, an oasis in the station.

The large, vertical circle is one of the recurring images in Averbuch's work, one of the enduring elements in his private sculptural vocabulary, and its immediate reference, its relation to the environment, constantly changes even as its symbolic meaning—its feeling of the cyclical continuity of existence—remains constant. In *Bridges and Reflections*, 2001, situated in front of the performing arts center at Illinois Central College, Peoria, two 18 foot high stone circles are cut across the middle by a linear horizontal motion of steel elements—another of Averbuch's recurring visual themes: the hovering horizon line, suspended dreamily above the earth. Here, the line is the river, the movement of water, with the steel elements resembling a cityscape—reflecting Peoria as a city divided by a river, each half reflected in the water below.

The range of forms and sheer imaginative prowess Averbuch can bring to the demands of integrating his public sculpture into the landscape is illustrated with remarkable variety in his Portland, Oregon, project at the enormous Rose Garden, which includes an indoor sports arena and a coliseum. The Rose Garden is located across the river from the main area of Portland, with three approaches to the complex by way of three bridges. Averbuch created three sculptures to mark the three approaches, each work in a style unlike the other two, reflecting the nature of Portland as a one-time frontier town, which drew waves of immigration over the course of its development, involving the continuous integration of many distinct cultural groups and styles.

Stone Water and Heaven, 1995, is like a large version of a garden sculpture, with a single seraphic copper wing rising next to a circle of stones, water in a circular trough cut along the top of the stones. *The Little Prince*, 1995, is a gigantic fallen crown, an image of a ruin of ancient majesty, of one-time splendor, and a version of another recurring theme in Averbuch's work: the obsolescence of the monumental, former monuments in the soil, like ancient relics. *Terra Incognita*, 1995, is an enormous gateway made of wood and stone. Seventeen feet high by 40 feet long, it is another of Averbuch's hovering horizontal lines, holding up two massive blocks of stones. Three enormous cords of vertical, pointed wooden stakes bolster the structure, one cord in the middle and one at each end, with open spaces below the stone blocks, like gateways through which the entering crowds could pass. The work is one of the purest examples of the distinguishing characteristics of Averbuch's sculpture: tied to the environment, idiosyncratic, and yet entirely accessible, its imagery impossible to completely misunderstand, even if ultimately mysterious and impossible to fully comprehend.

Even as Averbuch's private sculptural vocabulary ingeniously conducts the technical work of public sculpture, of integrating sculpture and the environment in a manner useful and meaningful to the public, it also continues the contemporary paradigm by conducting Averbuch's private artistic journey, as uniquely his own as that of any studio artist. The range of his themes, his artistic concerns, is large and far too extensive to be explored fully here—much of it can be seen in the images in this book. However, what may be considered his primary, most frequently recurring themes are worth examining briefly.

One of the most compelling concerns in Averbuch's *oeuvre* is the impossibility of the monumental. It is the "question mark" in his "monuments": the recognition that we no longer seem inclined to celebrate the place we hold in the cosmos and our endurance beyond the vicissitudes of history. Perhaps, it is because we have become too Postmodern, too self-aware of ourselves as creatures of history, rather than seeing ourselves champions of its defeat. But to a greater extent, it is because of the century of disillusionments we have just suffered. The twentieth century was the great experiment in utopian visions, in efforts to end the continual drifting of civilization, to complete and perfect the human story—to achieve an "end to history." And we know now that it all came to naught.

In a series of works created over a period of more than 20 years, Averbuch's aesthetic concern has been with the aftermath of the disillusionment that has followed our utopian pursuits, that has come with the failure of our dreams. These sculptures seem to be post-apocalyptic, not in the sense of being visions that arise after the end of civilization, but visions that arise after the end of unqualified hope, after the belief in unlimited possibility. They are post-monumental works, which recognize that human history is little more than a struggle to survive, and human perfection can never be achieved.

Categorically, this is the theme of the fall, and it is carried through Averbuch's career by works with fallen elements. Most directly and in his earlier years, the frequently recurring image was a dome or a crown fallen to the earth. In *The Fall*, 1989, *After the Reign*, 1990, *Berlin Dome*, 1994, *The Little Prince* (in the Portland project), and *She Wolf*, 1995, the symbol is clearly one of fallen majesty: the gigantic form of a crown in the dust or of a toppled dome. The form of *She Wolf* transforms the fall of majesty into the image of war, for it also resembles a missile, a weapon of destruction, as well as the she wolf of the title—a clear reference to the legend of Romulus and Remus, sons of Mars, the god of war, who were raised by a she wolf and who became the founders of ancient Rome, and thus of civilization. Our grandeur, our glory, is nothing but the result of war, and like the empty interior of the sculpture that is revealed in the view from the back, it is a vacuous thing.

The fallen form takes on a new structure in later works, a structure of the broken vessel, as in *In the End of Utopia (The Big Balloon is Far)*, 1999, *Air*, 1996, and *Time Passing*, 1997. *In the End of Utopia (The Big Balloon is Far)* is an assemblage of wood, glass, and stone, over nine feet tall and suggesting a form that should have been taller still. Wood slats have been arranged to grid the shape of an aerial balloon, which is rooted in stone blocks that could never get off the ground. It has fallen over, resting its weary, worried head on the earth, like Shelley's shattered statue of Ozymandias, the wreckage of a colossal statue of an ancient, forgotten king, who once ruled all he surveyed. But now, only the broken remnants of the statue can be found: "Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Visible within the wood balloon is an enormous glass globe—a clarified and gleaming idea that cannot be lofted into the air, that cannot escape the weight of its housing, that is going nowhere. Our most ambitious thoughts are earth-bound. They will not lift us to the skies.

But there are no final judgments in Averbuch's works, no lasting triumph of the tragic, of despair. Ultimately, there is an ambiguity of all hope and of all despair, of all sense of monumentality and commemoration, and of all cynicism and desperation. There is an intimate

and intricate integration of hope and loss, of the victorious and the tragic. Each one portends the other.

For example, *The Dove Tower and Steps to the Bottom of a Pyramid*, 2004, which is located at the University of Connecticut–Storrs, is an apt example of the inescapable connection between hope and the tragic. The work is in two parts: an inverted stone dove tower, standing on its top and at an angle, and a stone, stepped well, dropping into the lawn in front of the school's Information Technologies and Engineering building. It is a combination of opposing tensions and implications, a confrontation that reaches both to the depths and to the heavens. The visibly unstable, upside-down tower, in a work constructed only a few years after 9/11, is reminiscent of the destroyed towers of the World Trade Center, but the dove is a symbol of peace, as well as the bird that flew back to Noah with signs of emerging land, of deliverance. The inverted tower also refers to the columbaria that can be found throughout the Middle East. They are places for collecting manure from birds to fertilize the land, and also places to bury the dead. The pyramid runs in the wrong direction, runs into the earth, but it is also taken from the stepped wells in India, in which one descends into the earth to obtain water, to locate the source of life. From the bottom of the sculpture's inverted pyramid, one cannot see the university, or the lawn, or the earth—but one can see the sky.

Similarly, *Divided World*, 2000, finds an intricacy of tragedy and hope in one of the most politically charged, and politically tragic, places on earth. *Divided World* is located in Lavon, in the Galilee, in Israel—in the place of one of the most difficult and interminable conflicts of the modern world. The work resides on a hilltop, immediately above an area half of whose inhabitants are Arab and half are Jewish. It contains two stone stairways, built out of stones from destroyed houses in the area—the stones are dense with the tragic history of the place. The stairways are mirror images of each other, but running in opposite directions and running in parallel—they do not meet. Between them extend two arches, each one rising from one of the stairways, the two stretching toward each other—but they do not meet. Two boulders hang from chains, hang down from the ends of the arches, and the boulders do meet, but more like fists than like a clasping of hands.

The overall form of the work was inspired by the observatories at Jantar Mantar in India, but this is no image of reaching toward the stars. *Divided World* speaks of broken dreams and continually lost possibilities, and it also speaks of something else. As one changes one's perspective by walking around the sculpture, the stairways seem to join and the arches seem to blend into one. The movement that appears as one moves about the work is like the closing and separating of doors, but it is also like the fusion of the parts into a single conception, into a joining together of oppositions. And when one looks closely at the two boulders, one sees that the point of contact is slight, and delicate, barely there. For all their hard mass, they touch gently, like the brushing of a hand across a cheek, like a breath gliding along the hairs of the skin—like a kiss.

Avanim Vetseadim (Steps and Stones), 2008, at Gezer Park, in Leawood, Kansas, is a stone ladder reaching for the sky. But it is positioned in a pond, so that it is reflected in the water, it also stretches downward. An aspiration that reverses itself, and yet, in either direction, it presses toward the unreachable, toward the sky, or toward the immaterial reflection. And the horizon line is evaporated, the ground is dispelled, and as in the many works in which Averbuch suspends the horizon line above the ground, the point of gravity, of the dragging to the earth, is erased. The integration of earth and sky, the duplication of each in the other, is the artistic integration of transport beyond the degrading materiality with the quotidian world, with the weight of mortality. In the ambiguity of its reaching, *Avanim Vetseadim* configures an aspiration for something beyond the material, beyond the merely visible, that also stretches into the earthly, the tragic.

This is the complexity of hope, and despair: in the real world, each one is to be found in and behind the other. And this is the heart of Ilan Averbuch's contribution to public

sculpture, his revised paradigm for public sculpture. His sense of hope that is always qualified but never eradicated by despair and loss is a matured judgment, a judgment taught by life experience. It stands in place of the exhortations of simplified, uncomplicated, cartoon-like virtues that are the mark of traditional public works, of the unqualified commemorations of standard memorials that express our admiration but not our sense of reality. Averbuch's is the art of the tempered judgment of the mature mind, of the mind that faces the truths of life. In that, he achieves one of the highest accomplishments of art: to mature the minds of the society in which it occurs. And the maturing of the mind is both a renewed possibility of hope, and a recognition of the inevitability of the tragic.