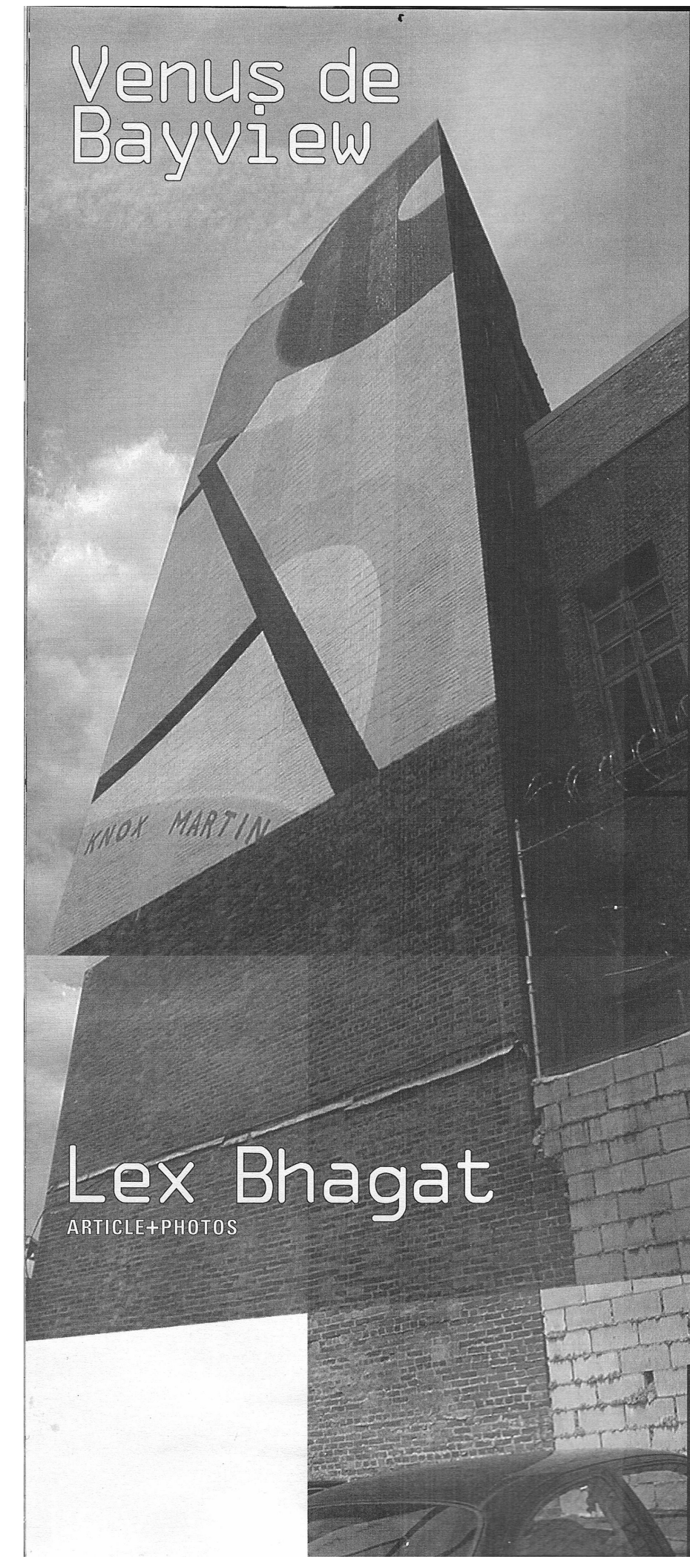


Venus de Bayview



BEND FOLD MUTILATE DECORATE
a column exploring intersections of art and urbanism

I asked myself: where do art and incarceration make contact? Is it accidental that I stumble upon the answer, searching for a parking spot before going to The Kitchen?

Driving into Chelsea from downtown on the West Side Highway brings one before one of the most visible works of public art in the city of New York. Venus is a 10-story high abstract field of forms and colors wedged between blue sky, Chelsea Piers and pre-war brick; marked by a flamboyant signature, Knox Martin, echoing the spirit though not the typography of graffiti. I had the pleasure of speaking with Mr. Martin this past summer about his painting and the unabashed pride in that signature could be heard throughout our conversation. "I can't think of a more powerful piece of outdoor painting in the City of New York," he told me. Sadly, circumstances make it difficult to disagree with him for it's difficult to think of any other existing pieces of large outdoor painting in Manhattan. The many paintings which once graced Houston Street, including Mr. Martin's own *Woman on a Bicycle*, have all given way to "Tiger Schulman Karate," "DKNY," etc... The triumphant, building-sized socialist murals which once graced the Lower East Side have been replaced by billboards for 555 cigarettes, Old English 800 and AT & T. Even modest murals have disappeared from Manhattan. Large commissioned burns by local graffiti writers, such as "Crack Kills", or murals of rainbows and flowers which once dotted the walls near public schools and playgrounds now seem relegated to the boroughs or held in select preserves of defended space such as La Plaza Cultural on E. 9th Street.

The landscape has shifted, altered by a flood of cash that has washed away all public painting. Yet here Venus stands before us,

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remaining through the flood. Its significance lies foremost in its endurance and its survival must be explained before any formal or painterly considerations may be entertained. What is it that preserves Venus from the corrosive power of the revenue stream?

Simply put, **Venus** graces the walls of a state penitentiary, the Bayview Correctional Facility for Women. A curious situation indeed. Painted in 1970, as part of the Citywalls project, on the walls of an old sailor's home which had become a drug rehabilitation facility, **Venus** is a remnant of an idealistic modernism where painting and sculpture were deployed to humanize the disjunctive effects of metropolitan gigantism. Created in 1976 from that rehab facility, in the wake of New York's new mandatory minimums for drug offenders (aka the Rockefeller drug laws), Bayview is a harbinger of things to come. Is it accidental that they should meet here, at the corner of 19th Street and 10th Avenue? Before that may be answered, we should first ask ourselves what is the place of the prison within the metropolis. [1]

It might seem odd to find a prison within the new glass and old brick of the Chelsea art world, yet the medium security facility for women nestles into the fabric of the neighborhood. Security cameras are inconspicuous. One would have to look hard to notice the extra razor wire on the fenced-in roof. At street level, it appears no more fortified than the nearby Presbyterian Seminary and pedestrians might cut across its parking lot, oblivious to the function of the building above them. (That is, if they do not notice the many signs announcing the directive against photographing the facility without permission.) Indeed, the prison fits right in. Have art lovers looking for a parking spot driven by it for years without knowing what it is? Are there other prisons in the City?

There are a variety of institutions of confinement flourishing in modern society, administered to variously discipline the mind, the body and even the family. "Prison", though, generally implies a fortress-like structure, remote from city streets where criminals are held for long periods of time. "Prison" implies an isolated place where, depending upon your political perspective, convicts are

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kept safely removed from "the public" or sadly removed from networks of family and community. "Prison" implies "the penitentiary", a young institution, which surprisingly appears within the heart of the modern city.

As Calvert Hodges says in *A World Without Prisons*: "Developing institutions for enforcing the laws of society is a relatively modern practice... [In feudal times] prisons existed solely for prisoners awaiting trial or punishment. It was not until the 16th Century that such places of confinement were themselves to be considered a form of punishment." While the first of these institutions dates back to mercantile England (Bridewell was established in London in 1557), it can be argued that these were mere prototypes and that the first truly modern prisons appear with the birth of the United States and the French Republic. [2]

This is no mere accident. On the one hand, revolution leads to a very real crisis of authority. In the medieval order, there is no question of a right to punish. God in the highest, who rules Heaven and Earth, speaks his will through the sovereign King. In a Republic, stripped of the superstitions of Divine Right, who has the right to punish? Political revolution opened up vast metaphysical space where numerous rationalist and Christian utopians ventured an answer to this question. The whole history of the penitentiary must be understood as part of this tradition of utopian experiment. Is there not another more directly physical and spatial integrity between the prison and the new Republics?

The American Republic was founded upon an order we know as Federalism, often described to schoolchildren as "checks-and-balances." On the blackboard before her sixth grade pupils, the teacher draws flow charts of branches of power - judicial, legislative, executive - with lines illustrating their freedom assuring ebb-and-flow. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt describe this Federal system as "network power". Establishing network power is novel, for the revolution refuses to simply transfer the title of power and right (i.e. seizing authority from the Crown but leaving that authority intact). Rather, "from an arrangement internal to the multitude, from a democratic interaction of powers

linked together in networks, the new sovereignty can arise, which both constitutes a central power and maintains power in the hands of the multitude." Power then will rise out from the collective productivity of the people, rather than exist in and of itself.

This novel power faces crises, firstly, in the experience of "the conflictive and plural nature" of the people, which threatens to disrupt order. Thus, while the Crown is refused as the source of power, basic needs for security and safety give absolutist power a chance to "return through the back door... when the multitude demand special instruments of correction and control." Witness, then, in France the appearance of Emperor Napoleon. And where is America's Napoleon? Why doesn't Washington take such a step? Negri and Hardt find their answer in the frontier: conflicts and contradictions in the new American society could be exported West, to play themselves out at the margins, and preserve an illusive harmony in the center/East. Indeed, they say, "how hollow the rhetoric of the Federalists would have been... had they not presupposed this vast and mobile threshold of the frontier!" More fundamentally, with Revolution, "liberty is made sovereign, and sovereignty is defined as radically democratic within an open and continuous process of expansion." Napoleon, interestingly enough, is still the Emperor of the *Republic*. Network power is preserved and restored operating in "a space that is always open." An openness which, I would stress, is not merely external, but internal. Hence Revolution results in a complex of violences - the Westward Expansion with its relocations and Indian Wars, the Napoleonic Wars, Hausmannization, and the birth of the prison - inherent in the ideals of network power. [All quotes this paragraph, *ibid* to footnote 3]

Think again of the simplicity with which the schoolteacher sketches out the branches of government, the ethereal space of power in which they seem to float without history, without bodies. How odd that this system must be explained, in words and symbols, to the young in order that society may go on! It is an abstraction. Yet, these powers occupy places. The pictures in the history books highlight their Greco-Roman and Glass-and-Steel Beltway abodes.

They affect bodies. They are constituted by people. It is a concrete abstraction. Mathematics and metaphysics brought down to Earth and superimposed over soil and body like a latex glove.

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The new Republics (both in America and France) are abstract polities. As such, they dissolve concrete polities; that is, Cities, Towns and Counties - historic municipalities directly organizing their immediate environs. Hausmannization is the flip side of the Westward Expansion: they are the same coin, made possible by the new constitutional politics.

"The Revolution gave birth... to the disappearance of forms of community control over political authority that had been enjoyed since antiquity. Also among the revolution's effects was the definitive constitution of abstract space." [4]

What is abstract space? A "result and container" of the modern political revolutions, it has "as its goal, on the one hand, the reduction of the 'real' to a 'plan' existing in a void and endowed with no other qualities, and on the other hand, the flatness of a mirror, of an image, of pure spectacle under an absolutely cold gaze." [Ibid] The birth of the United States is a threshold in the emergence of abstract space, which will require that space no longer be subject to the actual uses of its inhabitants but rather proscribed according to plan. Abstract space requires that the unpredictable, or the unplanned, be removed. Abstract space will require the prison.

And so the prison is born as the penitentiary, with Liberty as an ironic midwife. The Quakers in Pennsylvania were the early experimenters of this new institution, which aimed at "reforming" the sinful mind of the felon through solitude and work. The model was exported from their flagship Eastern Penitentiary in

Philadelphia to New York where it informed the creation of Manhattan's Newgate Prison in 1794. The penitentiary's career in Manhattan is brief but significant. It is here that it cuts its teeth: the Quaker Model modified, secularized, capitalized by New Yorkers to become the Auburn Model, which will proliferate throughout the modern world, via De Tocqueville.

By 1825, things at Newgate Prison were breaking down. Even with the establishment of the House of Refuge for juvenile delinquents, and the Bloomingdale Asylum for the mad, Newgate, built for a population of 450, was too crowded. While the mad-house begins its successful few stint in the big city, the convict-prison packs up to "head upriver," looking for work. Sing-Sing is born at this point, at an exhausted silver mine on the edge of the Hudson, near Poughkeepsie. The 169 male inmates hew stone for three years, for the New York City market as well as the construction of their Big House, to which the entire population of Newgate is transported in 1828.

With Sing Sing, the place of the prison becomes OUTSIDE the city, at the point of raw material production. The prison's population and function is refined and clarified, through the removal of the "mad", first by their concentration at the Utica State Hospital after 1848, then with the establishment of the facility for the criminally insane at Auburn in 1859. In the networks of normalization, the prison is for those who can work. In the Reconstruction-era South, this leads to the establishment of neo-slavery plantation prisons. In the North, the industrial prison tradition will flower for a century, informing the growth of Sing-Sing and giving birth to prisons such as Clinton, Woodbourne and Walkill. It moves so hand-and-glove that it is not until the Sixties, when the system is in crisis, that its integrity with the industrial system is noted. Prisoners begin organizing in solidarity with workers and activists. As American prisons meet insubordination, wildcat strikes and the Attica Uprising of 1971, the New York-based Council for the Liberation of Everyday Life notes "it is not accidental that the latest prisons are indistinguishable from the latest schools or the latest industrial complexes."

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When the prison returns to the city, does this equation still hold? Bayview makes evident that the prison has returned from the remote margins, to take a place within the city again.

1976. New York's old prisons have been feeling the effects for several years of the Rockefeller drug laws, as well the increase in violent crime that came with economic recession and the homecoming of shell-shocked veterans. This growth pressure will urge the establishment of a slew of new facilities. Bayview is created in a mammoth old sailor's home near the Chelsea piers. At the same time, a bit upriver, a large campus consisting of Fishkill, Downstate and Beacon Correctional Facilities is being created from the Mattewan State Hospital. This evil complex of fairy castles had been built in 1892, as the state's first facility for the "furiously mad."

What do they share with the latest schools or the latest industrial complexes? Are they not more akin to some other social project?

June 10th, 1976. An old public school in Queens. Paint is peeling from the walls. Gordon Matta-Clark is sitting in the basement on a wooden bench, listening to an audio installation by Vito Acconci. Vito, at that moment, is looking down from the third floor of the building through a cut Gordon has made to the first floor. Nancy Foote looks up from ground level and says "Hi, Vito." It is the opening of the Rooms show at PS1. Leo Castelli is walking the dilapidated halls, not in the least bit surprised to find himself in such an abandoned space since fashionable people are now moving into old warehouses, old factories, and abandoned rooming houses.

This is the moment of historic re-use. The city has been assaulted for decades to make room for automobiles, expressways and skyscrapers. A reaction is expressing itself. Ecological sensibility. Limits to growth. Greenspaces. Human Scale. Historic Preservation. These are the buzzwords of development at the time. We can hear them informing the development of the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, established 1970. "Inside the security gates are more than fifty buildings in a variety of styles and ages. Some women are housed in cells

in 3-story brick buildings constructed in the 1960's. Some live in modern cookie cutter dormitories. Fiske Cottage, built in 1933, serves as 'honor housing' with individual rooms, to which the inmates hold the keys, for 26 women. New mothers reside with their babies in the nursery."

The major area for preservation and re-use activity was in housing. Urban clearance for highways and other new construction was destroying neighborhoods. Black neighborhoods had been especially hard hit. From Baltimore to Newark to NYC to New Haven, blocks of homes had been razed to make room for housing projects that were never built or were built to house fewer people than they displaced. The resulting housing crisis created pressure to move into existing, non-domestic structures.

The creation of Bayview echoes the major concerted housing issue in New York at the time: the efforts of artists to create lofts in SoHo and Tribeca. A 1985 report on Bayview by the Correctional Association of New York (CANY) cites faulty wiring, lack of fire and safety precautions, unsanitary conditions conducive to insects and other pests, and a lack of seasonal temperature controls as major problems. I do not mean to overlook the vastly different social circumstances when I say that these are exactly the same things that code enforcers had been saying about loft living for 20 years. Why did artists endure such conditions? Why did the State prefer to keep women in such conditions, rather than constructing something new at the outskirts of the city? Because it was necessary for both to be within Manhattan, the accessible heart of the City.

The CANY report says elsewhere: "All parties agree that Bayview's single most positive feature is its location in New York City, where most of its inmates lived prior to their incarceration. Its location in the city has enabled women to maintain relationships with their families, the most significant factor in an inmate's ability to cope with the prison environment and to adjust successfully to the outside world upon release." The report stressed at other points that it is essential that there always be a women's prison inside New York City, that it is especially important for single mother inmates to have access to their social networks

during their incarceration. By the 70's then, the latest prisons are indistinguishable from the latest trends in housing. Sadly, we see on the one hand a housing movement informed by choice, by active creation of new social and domestic space; and it's antithesis - the prison as housing project.

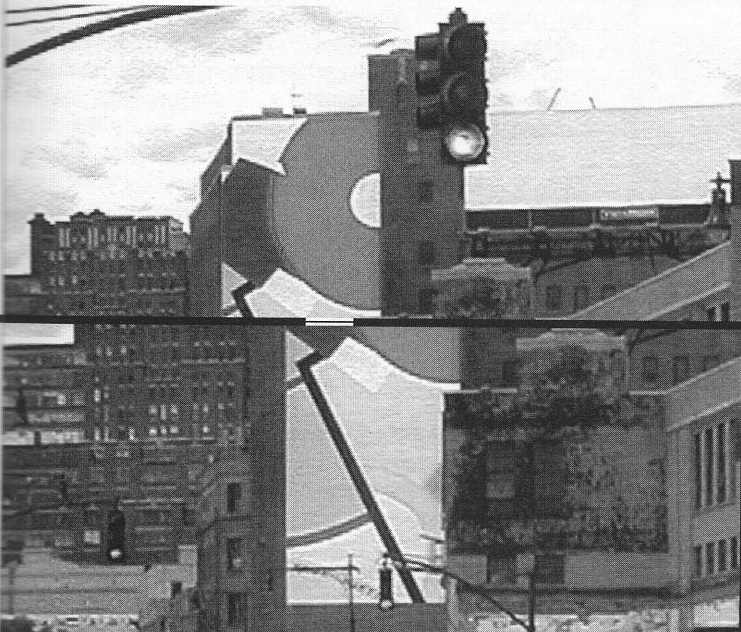
Gilles Deleuze has described the passing of what Michel Foucault called "disciplinary society" into what he calls "societies of control": "It's the prison that serves as the analogical model of the disciplinary society, where one is always moving from one enclosed environment- school, family, factory, hospital- with its reductive rules of proper and normal behavior. In the society of control, the factory gives way to the corporation which, Deleuze asserts "is no longer involved in production." [5] This has an implication for the prison which then faces a crisis of function: there is no need for the project of fine tuning bodies for the industrial order. In Europe, in the 1960's and 1970's, space is again opened up for utopian experimentation with the criminal outsider. Novel schemes of confinement at home, made possible by electronic tracking, are played with. In America, though, we find the creation of a prison archipelago that surpasses the most ambitious dreams of a Stalin. All cold, born of reason and the rule of the market. For in the society of corporate capitalism, not human beings, not even "offenders", but "sentences", an abstract matrix of body, time and control, will become a new terrain for capitalism to plan for and trade in. The body of the convict becomes a locus for a current of expenditure to flow through, a locus that can be concentrated, stacked up and profited upon. Thus, in America, we find this new project for the prison as housing.

Some may disagree with this. Right-wingers may truly believe their rhetoric spouted about crime and public safety. Others may interpret the prison archipelago as a sinister Keynesian project for post-industrial society. I will admit, it is a tenuous assertion. I have little evidence besides the odd fact that when the disciplinary project fades, the prison is subject to all the vogues of domestic architecture. [6] When the historic re-use phase has worn itself out in the early 1980's, the time for new construction comes again. The State puts its money where its heart has gone: the Urban Development Corporation, estab-

lished to fund housing development in the inner-cities of New York in the 1960's, is diverted to fund the construction of prison complexes near the Canadian border. This is Reagan-era urban development. Washington Correctional Facility in 1985, where the "community lifestyles program" appears, analogous to the "community living condos," where program attempts to replace neighborhood. Eventually, the crunch sets in. Summit C.F. is built in 1988 with its pre-fab trailer homes and simple buildings in the woods. Or the Bare Hill C.F. the same year, "the model of community interaction."

As New Urbanism comes into fashion in architecture, the "Cluster Model" informs prison development. The prison complexes attempt to emulate a town. It is only a matter of time before these prison-cum-New Towns would require a prison of their own. In 1998, the Upstate Correctional Facility, created for the disciplining of inmates, is built in the Malone Cluster. Within the walls of Upstate "1200 of the 1500 inmates will be locked in cells 24 hours a day, with the exception of 1 hour court-mandated exercise." What is this if not a prison for prisoners? And what is represented by the prison as housing project if not the emergence of a new kind of urban space: a network space, analogous to the network space of suburbia. Within these networks, any space is equivalent to any other and all are devoid of history.

What does all this mean for our painting on the side of the prison, the **Venus** of Bayview, which has been protected from the capitalization of space through its



ownership by the State? It is a contact point of so many forces: the history of Chelsea, the a-history of the prison, the hunger of real-estate. All are bound up here. Perhaps this explains something of the persistence of Martin's **Venus**? Perhaps it is not accidental that this particular painting would come to mark a threshold of the State's prison-network and Manhattan.

What is this painting, **Venus**, really? A collection of shapes and colors: Are they even composed? Or have they landed there by chance? The only obvious intention is in color: striking color! A powerful interaction of red with blue. Blue: both the pure but static blue of the picture and the ever changing blue of the sky. Red: an aggressive red that pushes at edges. It is in the red that a subject appears, though not the subject stated by the artist.

As Mr. Martin says: "The painting is a poetic geometry. It contains the parts of a woman, without being explicit." Does this explain the pastel tones of the lower part of the painting (the middle of the building)? Is this the softness of the belly and the hips? That visible softness around the divinity hidden within the folds? Is that black vertical really a fold? Or is that black vertical really a rise, a force, a thrust? The basic urge behind trees, cathedrals, obelisks, skyscrapers? What does it have to do with **Venus**, then?

The black vertical is Manhattanism, pushing the fields of red and blue skyward. It is the steel beam: one of the few sacred objects of our time. It pushes the red circle upwards: the red which strives for coherence. Were this on canvas, per-

haps the artist might have questioned the divine right of the rectangle and given this circle a wholeness beyond the limits of the frame. Such feats are impossible on a field of brick, though. The red which tries to go further and yet be whole is sliced up. Incoherence, loss of self, is the price paid for altitude. **Venus** is a picture of a human being in Manhattan.

The artist claims it's even more than that: "It's really a new kind of space, this work is. There is no ground in it. No matter how much a cubist painting fragmented space, within it there was always a foreground, a midground and a background." This statement may be flipped. **Venus** is the return of traditional, representational painting, representing the space the prison ushers is. Indeed a new project for abstraction... not the abstraction of existing forms, or the abstraction of concrete space but rather the representation of built abstract space, where the alienated individual moves about with no sense of ground; the transcendence/loss of ground in painting echoing the displacement of history and subjectivity in actual space.

It is a new kind of space, this **Venus**. And in this respect, it is allied to the project of the prison. The artist claims: "Really, it is ironic that this building became a women's prison, since here [in my painting] you have the liberation of woman, interacting with the confinement of woman." I disagree. The space of the painting anticipates the prison network that will appropriate the building it adorns. Indeed, the painting's 1998 restoration, an event of rather overlooked signifi-



cance in Chelsea, is testament to the harmony of the painting with the prison.

If there is anything ironic going on at Bayview, it is the building permits hanging in the halls, announcing the State's intention to restore the building's water-tower.

[1] Another issue remains to be explored: Inasmuch as it would be inappropriate to call this state-owned property "public space" the fact that it serves to protect a measure of non-commodified space brings up its own questions. What does the **Venus-Bayview** enigma say about the perversions of the idea of public space in America? And what exactly is 'state property' and how does that relate to public space? Alas, these questions must wait

[2] Dodge, Calvert World without Prisons: Alternatives to Incarceration throughout the World D.C. Heath and Co., Lexington, Mass: 1979.

[3] Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri Empire. Harvard, Cambridge: 200 pp> 161-169

[4] Lefebvre, Henri The Production of Space (Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith) Blackwell, Cambridge: 1991 p286-290

[5] Deleuze, Gilles "Postscript on the Societies of Control" October 59 (Winter 1992)

[6] The prison history which has preceded, and follows, has all been based upon the prisons of New York, where I live. I have not had the opportunity to research the history of other states, except for a superficial consideration of both Pennsylvania, and of the Federal USP system. I welcome refutations or concordance to this idea drawn from the history of other US states, or nations.

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