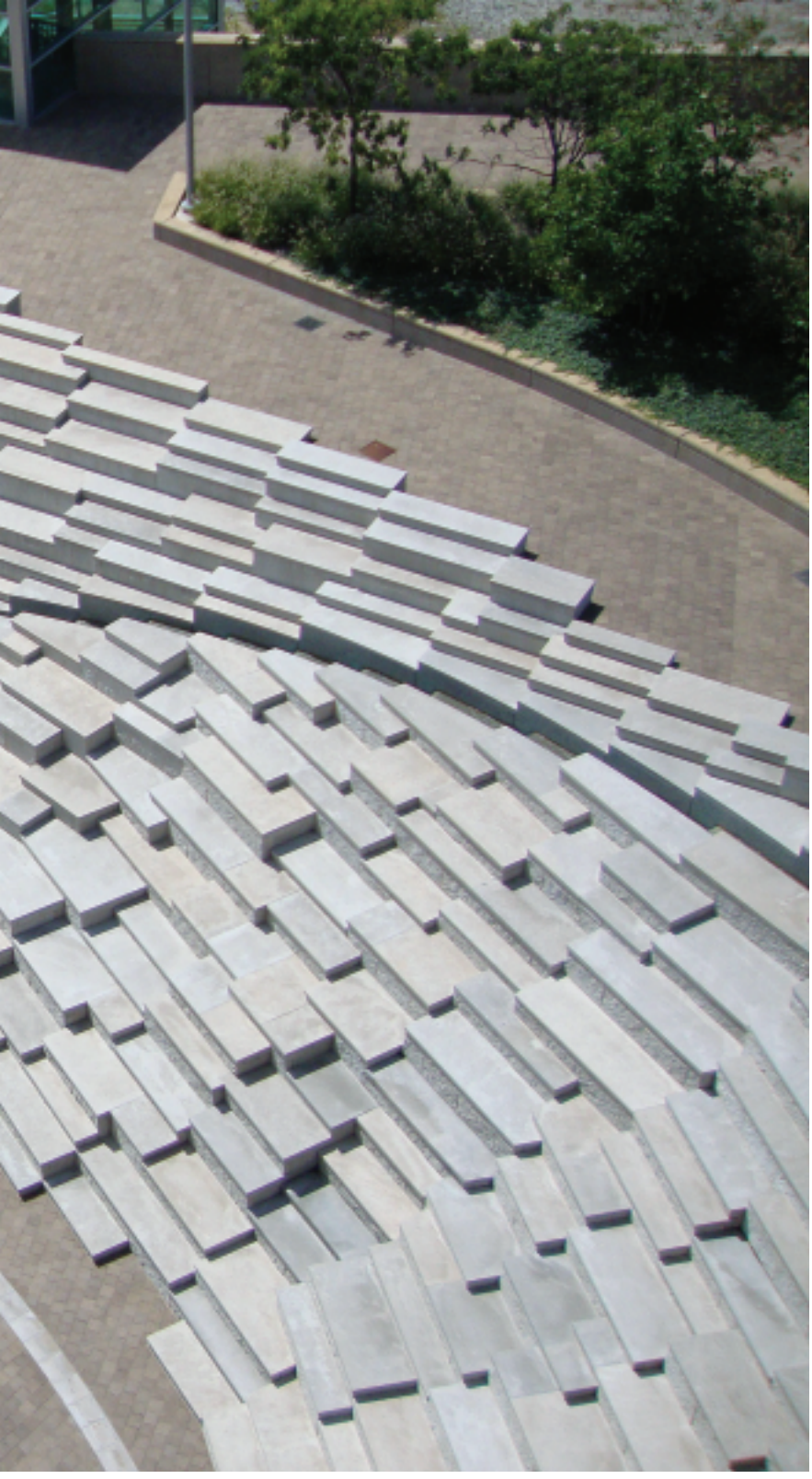
Making Art Visible

A Conversation with Athena Tacha



RICHARD E. SPEAR

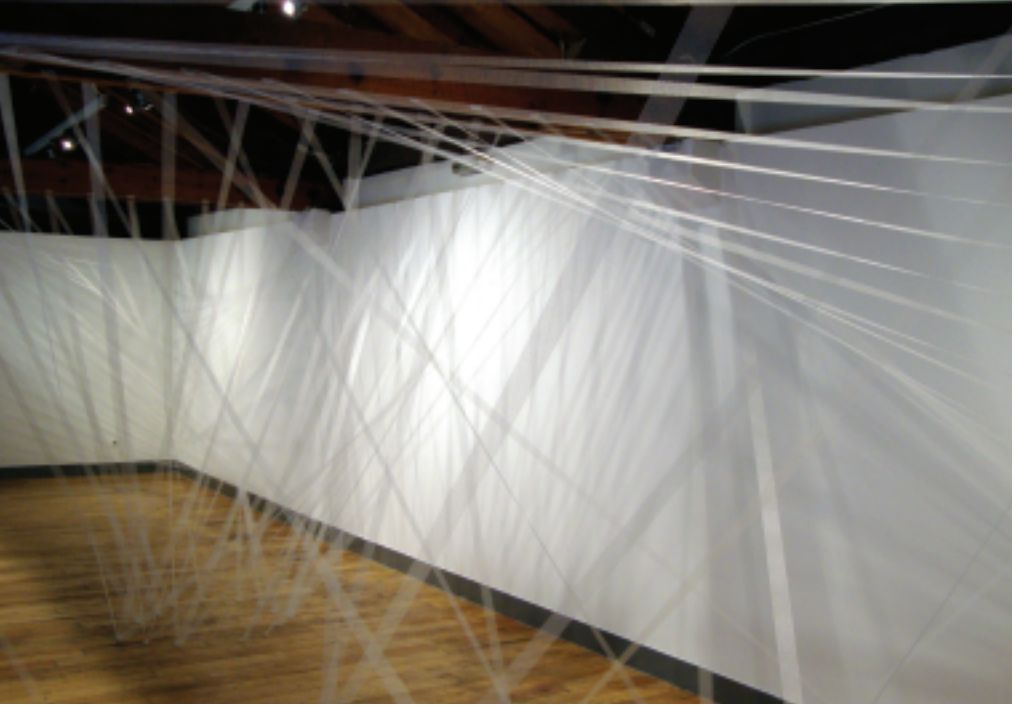
Athena Tacha, in collaboration with EDAW and AGA, Muhammad Ali Plaza, 2002–09, Louisville, KY, featuring *Dancing Steps* amphitheater and *Star Fountain*.

for Everyone

BY HELENI POLICHRONATOU

Athena Tacha was born in Greece and received MA degrees in sculpture (Athens) and art history (Oberlin College) and a PhD in aesthetics (Sorbonne). Since 1970, she has done large-scale outdoor sculpture and conceptual/photographic art and has executed more than 40 large commissions for public sites throughout the United States.

Tacha's work is represented in many museums, and she has exhibited widely. Atlanta's High Museum hosted a large retrospective in 1989, and a 40-year retrospective recently finished a tour of Greece. This interview took place when "Athena Tacha: From the Public to the Private" (organized by the State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, and co-sponsored by the J.F. Costopoulos Foundation and the Municipal Art Gallery-G.I. Katsigras Museum of Larissa) was on view at the Athens School of Fine Arts, its third venue. Tacha also contributed a site-specific installation to the recent inaugural show of the Onassis Cultural Center in Athens, "Polyglossia (30 Expatriate Greek Artists from America and Europe)."



Left and below: *Athena's Web*, 2010. White fiberglass plasterboard tape, installation at the State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki.

Heleni Polichronatou: *You were invited to participate in the inaugural exhibition of the new Onassis Cultural Center by its curator, Marilena Karra. How did your temporary installation come about?*

Athena Tacha: Marilena, who was looking for new work by expatriate Greek artists, found my Web site and decided to invite me, without knowing that my retrospective was traveling through Greece in 2010. I went to see the huge space, still unfinished in October 2010; and back at home, I made a model of the area that was assigned to me, a corner facing one of the six massive columns that support the room's 16-foot-high ceiling. (It would take a Sampson to embrace such columns.) Marilena and the architects wanted me to do one of my "tape sculptures," a series that I began in Ohio museums in the late '70s (in 1982, I did one in Pittsburgh, initiating the Mattress Factory's series of installations by visiting artists). For those early works, I selected white plasterboard tape, a low-cost architectural material,

to connect vertical and horizontal features of each building in a variety of ways, transforming their spaces.

HP: *How does the Onassis piece differ from the earlier ones?*

AT: I had already made a tape installation for my retrospective at the Contemporary Art Museum in Thessaloniki, and trying to find local material, I discovered a white woven fiberglass tape that is sticky on one side. When I used it at the Larissa Municipal Gallery (the second venue), I primarily exploited its self-adhesiveness. At the Onassis show, I explored it further. I decided to use the huge column as the anchor for my work, wrapping 40 pieces of tape around it and then stretching them across the corner, as if the column were a fisherman gathering his nets. So, the title for the work, *Pull*, came to mind. From every point of attachment at the top of the walls, the tapes were then arranged in an irregular flow, like rivulets of water, expanding downwards into a cataract. The flowing tape areas were entirely improvised, like free-hand drawing with brush and ink on paper.

HP: *How would you explain the meaning of this work?*

AT: The tape "field" on the walls could be seen as foaming waves, quantum fluctuations, or even sensuous organic forms—and, of course, viewers could find other associations in it. But, for me, *Pull* (*elxis*, in Greek) can be conceived as the attraction of opposites on many different levels: massive column versus ethereal material; rectilinear ceiling strips versus spirals on the column and curlicues on the walls; clarity versus ambiguity or shifting complexity; fixed versus open-ended, multivalent forms; and "order" versus chaos—ultimately, the work communicated a tug of war between contrary systems or forces.

HP: *Turning to outdoor sculpture, the area of work for which you are best known, what is your most recent public commission?*

AT: This past decade has been my most productive, perhaps because I quit teaching. I executed seven large public commissions,

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***Pull*, 2011. White fiberglass plasterboard tape, 15 x 22 x 15 ft. Work installed at the Onassis Cultural Center, Athens.**

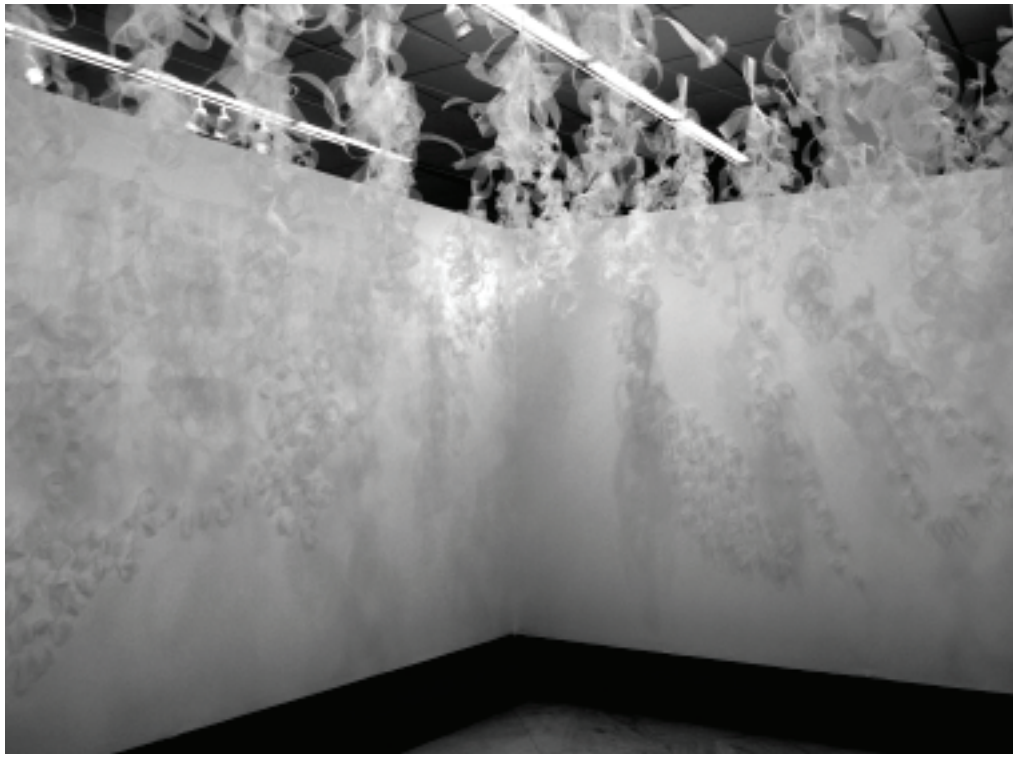
all but one in collaboration with architects, engineers, and landscape architects, and three of them consist of several distinct works. The largest, a five-acre commercial development in Friendship Heights, Maryland (on the border with Washington, DC), was started in 2002 and completed in 2009. I designed the pavement of a large oval plaza with planters and *Light Obelisk Fountain*, which extends from the corner of two main avenues to a new Bloomingdale's store. For the shopping arcade on one side of the plaza, I created an animated RGB ceiling called *Light Riggings*; and at the other end, I designed a 35-foot-high, animated LED, open-steel tower, *WWW-Tower* (named for the initials of the three avenues around the development, Wisconsin, Western, and Willard, and alluding to the Web). The 25-foot-high black metal obelisk floating over the fountain also consists of animated LEDs, ascending and descending along its four sides: two sides (blue and green) descend with changing water-like patterns, and the other two (yellow and red) ascend, constantly narrating a 12-minute text on "Water as Life." Actually, the idea of communication underlies all the parts of this commission.

HP: *What about other recent commissions?*

AT: Many of the sites were related to transportation, and the dominant materials were LEDs and water. At DC's new Morgan Boulevard Metro station, I designed a small plaza with curving color paths and planters and blinking sign posts. *STOP & GO* was named in honor of Garrett Augustus Morgan, the inventor of the first mechanical traffic crossing sign. And in Bethesda, Maryland, I designed a 300-foot-long ceiling for the pedestrian bridge linking a four-story parking garage to the Strathmore Music Center. The LED color animation of *Hearts Beat* proceeds in two irregular rows, side by side, with the colors moving sometimes in the direction of the pedestrians on the overpass, and at other times perpendicularly, in synch with the flow of traffic under the bridge. The animation program is based on the heartbeat of a woman (about 70 pulses/minute) and a man (60 pulses/minute)—my heart and my husband's, but it could be based on the heartbeats of any passing pedestrians.

HP: *It seems that transportation facilities are natural sites for you, since time, movement, and rhythm are central to your work.*

AT: That could not be more true. Those themes really came together in another commission from the middle of this past decade—*Riding With Sarah And Wayne*, a mile-long piece commissioned for the new Light Rail in Newark, New Jersey. There, I turned the pavement between the rails into a musical staff with black granite slabs as notes, inspired by the scores of melodies sung or written by Newark jazz stars Sarah Vaughan and Wayne Shorter. The lyrics are sandblasted in granite along the platforms of the Center and Broad



***RiverCloud*, 2010. White fiberglass plasterboard tape, installation at the Municipal Art Gallery-G.I. Katsigras Museum, Larissa, Greece.**

TOP: RICHARD E. SPEAR / BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST

Bloomingdale's Plaza, 2002–09, Friendship Heights, MD. Public space with *Light Obelisk Fountain*, animated LEDs, black aluminum, black granite, and water, 30 x 30 ft.; and *Light Riggings*, animated RGB ceiling.

Street stations, to be read by people waiting for the train. I had wanted the music to be broadcast in the stations every time a train arrived, but that exceeded the budget—which is always the problem with public art.

HP: *Why did you devote so much of your career to work in public spaces?*

AT: I believe in making art visible to everybody—not only the intellectual elite (museum visitors) or the rich collectors who can afford to buy it. The social upheavals of the late 1960s made me feel that I would be an irresponsible human being if I did not put art in the public domain. I also opted to make my sculpture as an environment—not a standing object—so that it could be experienced kinesthetically as well as visually (with the body moving through its space) and could serve a function, like landscape architecture. This way, I could also address issues about the environment—both natural and urban.

HP: *In your 1972 "A Call to Artists for Social Action," you invited artists to resist the corruption of their work by the gallery world. What was the response?*

AT: A number of younger artists at the time felt as I did and, encouraged by a new National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) program, we turned to the solution of proposing art for public spaces (called "site-specific" art after the mid-1970s), with the aim of improving the urban environment and raising people's consciousness about art. When I made my first public projects in 1975–76, some with NEA grants, only one state—Hawaii—had percent-for-art legislation, along with a few cities, including Philadelphia, Miami, and Seattle. However, the federal government's General Services Administration (GSA) had also started a program to commission artworks for new federal buildings (I won one of the first major commissions, for Norfolk, Virginia). Since then, almost every state, city, and county in the country has created some type of public art legislation, which has encouraged this major artistic movement—the first movement since Dadaism to operate outside the gallery world.

HP: *Your Franklin Town Park was one of the first public parks created as a work of art. The conversion of large urban spaces into works of art has become a key trend today, part of a broader intention to create a relationship between art and everyday life. Would you like to comment on this issue?*

AT: I was perhaps the first artist to conceive of a park as a *Gesamtkustwerk*, using its land, plantings, and even utilitarian features as materials (instead of clay, marble, or bronze). I did that in a proposal for the *Charles River Step Sculptures* for Boston's waterfront (January 1974) and in a proposal for the Sawyer Point Recreation Park in Cincinnati, Ohio (1977). I realized the same concepts in my "vest-pocket" *Tide Park* (Smithtown, Long Island, 1976–77) and in *Connections* at Franklin Town Park, an entire block in central Philadelphia (1981–92). Such parks are not to be confused with "sculpture gardens," which are really outdoor sculpture museums.

HP: *Since the '70s, artists have made a concerted effort to reintegrate nature into the built landscape. They incorporate plants, rocks, and water into public sculpture and participate in the rehabilitation of urban areas destroyed by industrial development. What do you think needs to happen between communities and artists to make a successful public art program of this kind?*

AT: Modern cities are a real visual and ecological disaster, particularly in their industrial and suburban sprawl (the entire area of Attica has become a suburb of Athens, which has spread as cancerously as Los Angeles). A number of idealists, like myself, have tried to propose solutions for improvement, but even in the case of supportive government administrations, art is never given enough funding to make a dent in the ugliness. In the West, few cities outside of Europe—Chicago and Vancouver come to mind—have a great architectural tradition or contemporary identity with which to foster good public art.

HP: *The evolution of public art gave birth to new concepts and new content, and younger artists took into consideration local cultural, social, political, and economic conditions. Richard Serra's* Tilted Arc *clashed with the aesthetic perception of its viewers. In your opinion, should artists create in accordance with public expectations? Should public art develop its own criteria for suitability, quality, and taste that might be different way from those of the atelier?*

RICHARD E. SPEAR

JIM FENNEL

***Connections*, 1981–92. Planted stone terracing, rock clusters, trees, and paths, work located in Franklin Town Park, Philadelphia.**

AT: Serra is a great sculptor, but he does not (or did not then) have a public consciousness. The *Tilted Arc* affair destroyed the future of permanent public art in the U.S. After that, administrations became scared to commit funding for permanent projects, and most of them turned to temporary projects. I personally believe that a good artist committed to public art must have a different attitude and develop a different artistic vocabulary from the studio and gallery artist. I do not mean that artistic visions and values should be diluted by general opinion. The commissioning institution and the artist must inform, educate, and consult the community to a great extent, but the general public should never dictate the art (too much "listening" to the community can be destructive). The artist, who has spent an entire lifetime studying how to make art and developing a personal vision, must ultimately create the public artwork. Even communal art, like the medieval cathedrals, had a leading mind, an architect or a sculptor who conceived and directed the project.

HP: *Some new cities have demonstrated strong growth in all forms of art. For example, artists were involved in the urban design of Villeneuve d'Ascq, France, showing that public space can be conceived as a living space through the power of art in relation to architecture, residents' needs, and aesthetic quality. What do you see as the future for artists in urban planning?*

AT: I have seen only a few views of Villeneuve d'Ascq, but I definitely think that artists should be involved in urban design projects, as well as in architectural and landscape complexes. This can only improve the urban fabric and ultimately, ideally, the quality of people's lives. Even though I am a loner working in my studios with assistants, I have often collaborated with architects. Since 2000, I have worked exclusively with architectural or engineering firms as an artistic consultant and designer of specific parts of their projects.

HP: *What work of yours in a public place do you prefer and why?*

AT: I have a lot of favorites, but I'll name two. *Green Acres* (1985–87) is a multimedia, environmental sculpture for the courtyard of the Department of Environmental Protection of the State of New Jersey in Trenton. It combines sculptural "step formations" that serve as seats, a green pavement of slate and granite slabs with sandblasted photographs of the endangered landscapes and species of New Jersey, planters with live plants specified by me, and red volcanic rock clusters—bringing together my sculptural, social, environmental, photographic, and conceptual interests.

My more recent favorite is the *Muhammad Ali Plaza* (2002–09) in Louisville, Kentucky, where the great boxer was born. In collaboration with the landscape architecture firm EDAW, I designed a glass waterfall at the top, the *Dancing Steps* amphitheater and pavement of the middle level, and in the center, the *Star Fountain* with a seven-minute program of animated LEDs lighting 48 glass columns that spiral inside a star-shaped basin. You can see a video of the light dance of *Star Fountain* on YouTube.

HP: *What are you working on now?*

AT: I have been invited to do a large outdoor installation at Grounds For Sculpture, which will stay up for a year, and I hope it can be executed by 2013. On a smaller scale, I have started on an extensive cycle of digital photo-works about the cyclical interaction between humans and nature, using my photographs of the fantastic stone landscape of Petra, which I visited again last spring. Like all of my art, these works are about our environment, on Earth and in the universe.

Heleni Polichronatou's PhD thesis for the Athens School of Fine Arts was Large Scale Artwork in Public Space: From the '60s to the 21st Century *(2007).*

PHOTOCREDIT