

Reflections from one of the sculptors who contributed to the 'Route of Friendship.'

I am trying to summarize the thoughts which have occurred to me and the experiences which I have made in preparation of my sculpture and during my presence at the international symposium of sculpture in Mexico. It was altogether a unique experience which will make an imprint on my future work. When the Organizing Committee of the XIXth Olympic Games first invited me to participate in the symposium and to design a sculpture as representative of Austria-USA, all the works of eighteen sculptors from five continents were planned to be placed on a flat area surrounding the training fields at the Olympic village. I then received a schematic plan of the proposed area with no further suggestions about the nature of my sculpture, except that it should be a monumental work. Subsequently I asked many questions, for example:

In what relation will these works be to each other?

Were they to be seen only from far away or could one walk around, through, and over them?

What materials could be used?

Would water and light be available to become part of them, etc.?

The idea of monumentality has an aftertaste of the monuments which are still littering so many of our cities, and from the visions of pseudo-monumentality which prevail among those who govern and administer the people. On the other hand, the visual arts today are concerned with scale and space, with simplicity and boldness, which are all ingredients pointing toward monumental expression. The unfamiliarity with monumental concepts among most artists of today must be also explained by the fact that there have been very few possibilities for monumental works. In my own case, I can say that there have been none. It became clear in my mind that there is a difference between 'large size' and 'monumental.' A model or sketch conceived small does not necessarily have monumental quality when blown up to very large dimensions. On the other hand, a small design can have monumental character and will also retain it in large proportions. What gives a work this monumentality is a question of proportions and relations within the work itself and in relation to man and the environment of this monumental work.

All my previous three-dimensional art

Herbert Bayer – Austria/USA
Station 12
16.50 m high

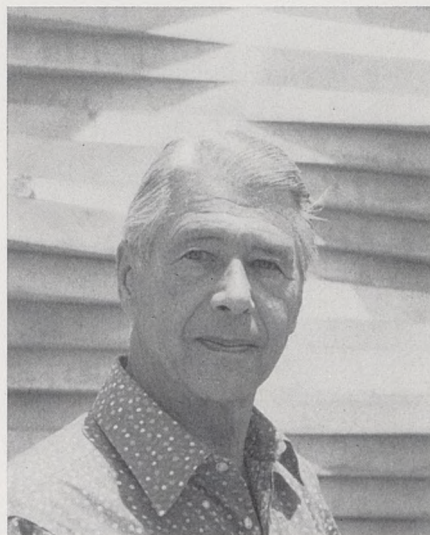


works have been designed for their specific surroundings and particular functions and I have, therefore, seen them as environmental designs.

During my first visit to Mexico, things became clearer. To my great satisfaction, it was decided not to place the sculptures at the Olympic village. It would have resulted in yet another outdoor museum, only of gigantic forms. The fact that they were to be placed along the new highway from Mexico City past the Olympic village to the big Azteca stadium and to Xochimilco opened completely new vistas and raised new and challenging problems. I have long considered the highway an issue worth the attention of the artist beyond the immediate necessity for planners, engineers, communication and traffic experts, landscape architects to study its problems towards more satisfactory and more functional solutions. To place eighteen sculptures in distances from one-half to two kilometers along a traffic artery is a new and interesting attempt to enhance a drive of approximately eleven miles. I see it as an experiment which had to be made sooner or later. Up to this point we have only known how to disgrace a highway with advertising. Although most of the works are placed so that one can stop and see them at close range, the major viewing point is from a distance from a car driving at a speed of 25 to 40 miles.

In designing my structure I allowed for a maximum view. This view changes radically when directly passing it. It may be argued that traffic hazards might occur if the drivers' attention becomes more occupied with sculptures than with the road. However, from billboards and other attention-seeking devices, we should already have knowledge of such dangers. To avoid any will, in the future, become a matter of relationship between traffic speed and the proper placing of an object of interest.

The material in which the works were to be executed became concrete. The 'Route of Friendship,' as it is called, will remain beyond the time of the Olympic Games as a stretch of highway of particular interest and the sculptures are planned for permanency. Through my training and experience I am familiar with the problems of designing for a commission, for a special purpose with its unique conditions. From the analysis of such restrictions, I concluded on a structure easy to execute with methods known in the building industry, especially as I foresaw that supervision might not be possible throughout the entire building period. My structure (position 12 on the map) 'articulated wall' consists of thirty-three concrete forms, each eight meters by one meter by 0.50 meter. They were prefabricated at the site. A steel column well anchored with deep foundations is the center core over which the individual beam forms were slipped by a crane and placed on top of each other in position to a total height of 16.5 meters (about 55 feet). It took little time to erect the wall. It is placed in a north-south position perpendicular to the road for maximum effect of light and shadows and for the greatest variety of views, and stands on a platform of dark grey concrete at sidewalk level. The area around is the 'pedregal', a black lava landscape with low natural growth. Because of its character, I prefer to call my work not sculpture, but construction.



Concrete, at least as it was used on my project, is not a handsome finished material. However much it was against my feeling for the truthfulness of a material, I painted the entire structure in yellow. Mixing pigment as an integral part into the concrete did not give the desired purity of color and can become spotty in places. First planned to be all white, I decided on a color, largely because color need not be excluded from a three-dimensional work and because of the rare opportunity to use bright color. Mexican people love color and the face of the contractor lit up when I told him that it would be yellow. I would like the form of the construction to dissolve through its bright coloring and to be defined only by its light and shadow effects. The 'articulated wall' should stand as a symbol on the highway.

There were difficulties in the execution with some of the sculptures which were, by their nature, more suited for steel or bronze, etc. but were forced into executing in concrete. Considering the large dimensions, some building problems developed. Here we must recognize a weakness: because artists were for so long excluded from great public tasks, few of them are trained and disciplined today to cope with the conditions, technical and artistic, which commissions pose. It was a blessing that there was no other authority (architect, client, etc.) involved. Mathias Goeritz, the director of the project, acted as a tactful mediator between artist, Olympic Committee, and contractors.

Although I have not seen the entire project finished, I cannot but express a personal thought. Some of the structures on the 'Route of Friendship' are works in the traditional sense of 'sculpture' and need not necessarily stand at a highway. The fact of their positions, the condition of seeing them from a far distance and when in motion should lead to special concepts. Whether three-dimensional objects placed at a motor route shall become one, an entity, with the traffic lane and its installations, and thus grow to be a new element in the aesthetics of traffic, is merely a question at this point. But I had envisioned that the sum total of the sculptures in Mexico might lead to a new expression, linked with the idea of modern motorized movement.

Herbert Bayer