

## ART

# Fresh Visions for Urban Oases

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

**T**O the extent that they both deal with public spaces within the limits of New York City, "Urban Paradise: Gardens in the City" at the Lehman College Art Gallery seems to follow the trail blazed by Wave Hill's current exhibition, "Transitory Gardens." But in reality, the two come from opposite directions.

The Wave Hill display consists of photographs taken by Margaret Morton of dwellings, with or without gardens, improvised by the dispossessed in Manhattan. That at Lehman casts its net as far as the outer boroughs, featuring grand, often grandiose, proposals for public parks submitted by artists to the Public Art Fund.

The show is an abbreviated version of one last spring at the Paine Webber Art Gallery in midtown Manhattan. Its presence at Lehman celebrates the gallery's 10th anniversary and inaugurates the college's Global Environment Awareness Year.

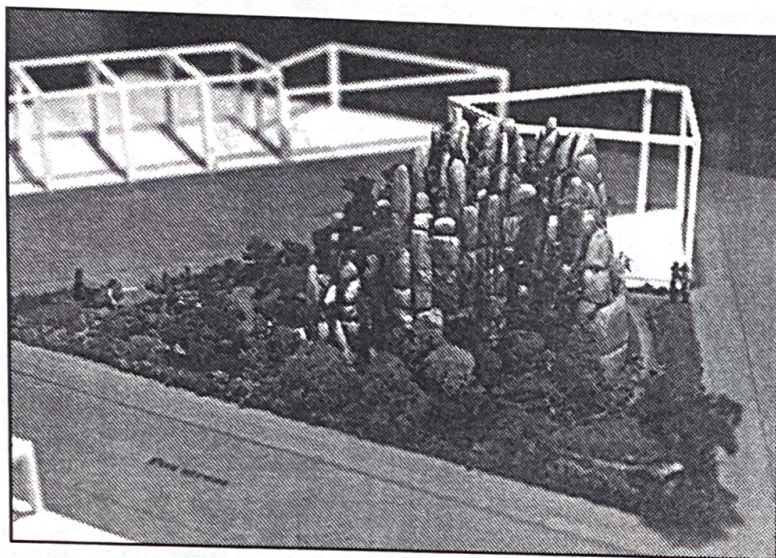
Apparently, the proposals come with the approval of the communities for which they were conceived, not to mention the support of numerous agencies, planners, fund-raising events and elected officials. Heading this formidable body are James M. Clark and Tom Eccles, who, in addition to serving as the fund's executive director and project director, respectively, are the show's curators.

Vito Acconci, Lorna Jordan, Gary Simmons and Justen Ladda, together with the partners, Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, Betye Saar and her daughter, Alison, are the artists. The means whereby their proposals were selected is not disclosed, but visitors are informed that so far only two have been scheduled for realization.

The first is Mr. Acconci's project for the Metro Tech Center in Brooklyn, which may acquire a better title when it opens for business — something along the lines of "Mugger's Heaven," perhaps. As indicated by the model, which has a gallery to itself, the structure is a maze of chest-high cages made of chain-link fencing over which ivy is expected to grow.

In a recent issue of the fund's journal, Public Art Issues, Mr. Acconci calls it "a garden for the body," adding that "as you go inside, further and further, the garden seems closer and closer" and "when you sit down, the planting is at your head, over your head."

Writing in the same journal, Harriet Scnie notes how "a material that



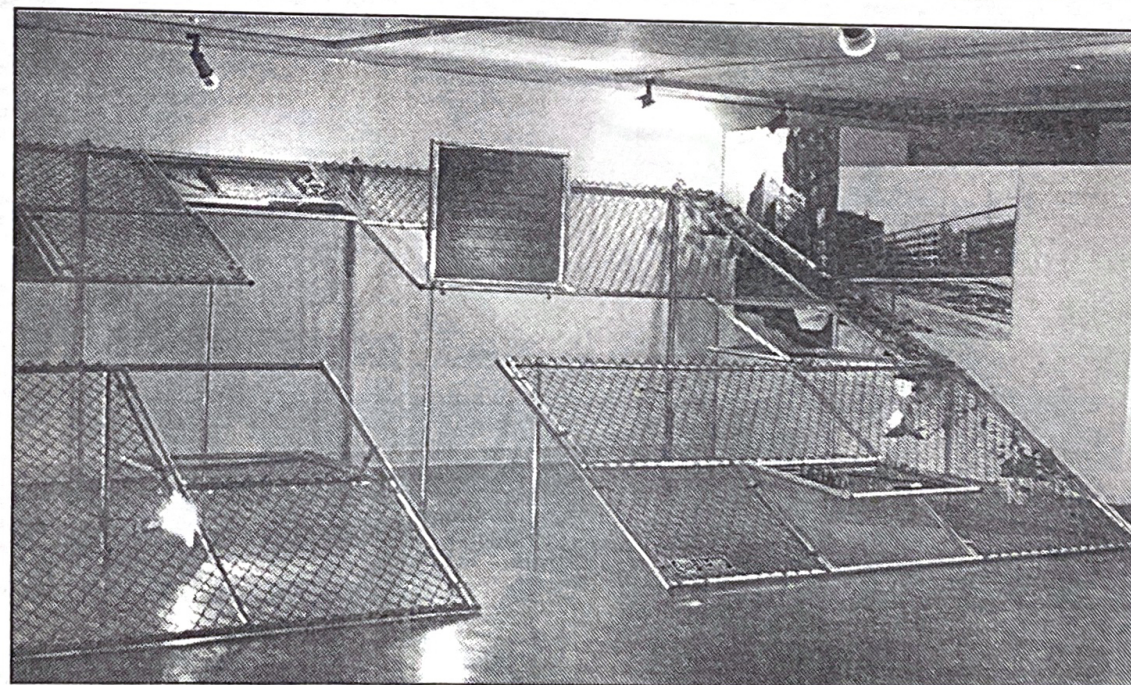
Proposals for urban spaces: "Fox Street Garden," above, by Justen Ladda; part of "Roots and Wings," right, by Alison and Betye Saar; project for Metro Tech Center by Vito Acconci.

defines exclusion" has been used "to create a bodily experience of inclusion," to which an appropriate response might be "Bah, humbug." Still, Ms. Senie does at least mention that this garden on corporate ground will receive corporate maintenance and surveillance.

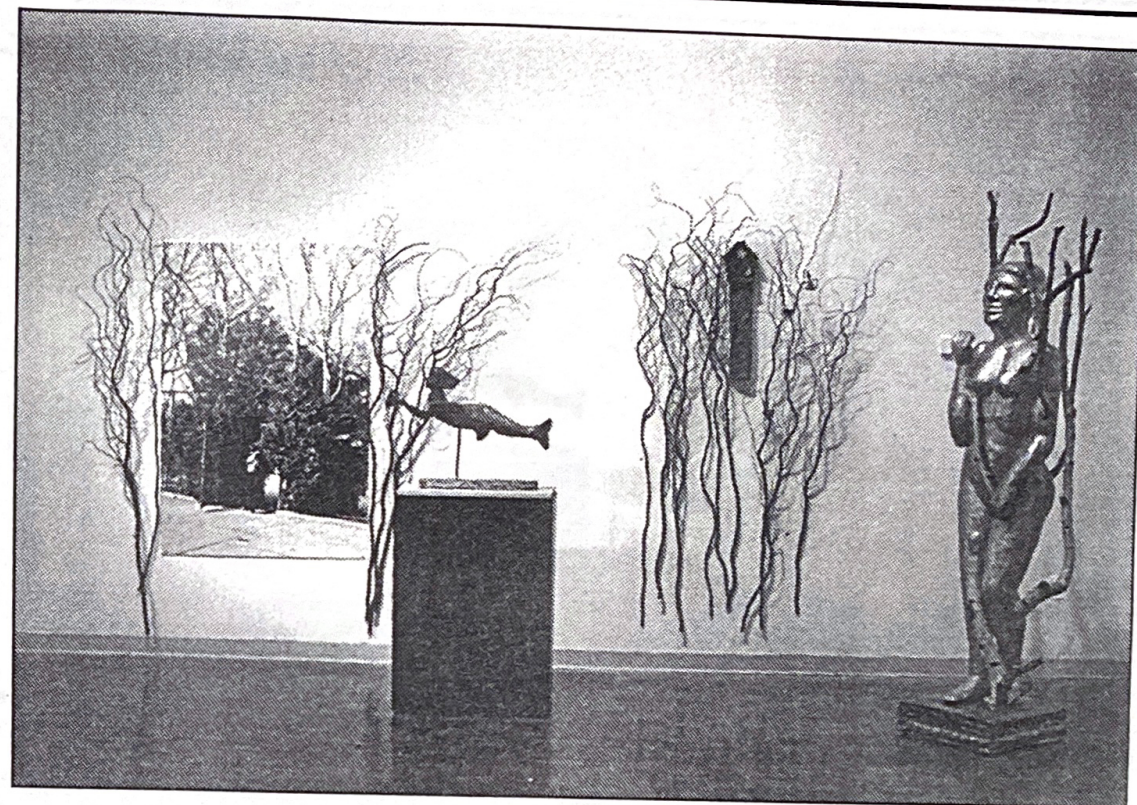
In contrast, Betye and Alison Saar proposed something closer to the community gardens of the Lower East Side, which seem to plan themselves and sometimes include found art. Following a proverb advising parents to give their children both roots and wings, the two artists fill their designated space at Public School 152, in Woodside, Queens, with raised flower beds shaped like a heart, a moon, and so forth, and adding a domed gazebo with a bird whirligig on top. They also include birdhouses on tall poles and, splayed around the fence, a black scarecrow figure with roots.

Best of all, however, is Alison Saar's larger-than-life wood carving of a woman, which has tiny mirrors for eyes, sprouts birch branches and is painted silver.

Equally inviting is the garden devised by Justen Ladda for a triangular lot bounded by 167th, 169th and Fox Streets in the Bronx. As rendered in the model, the principal feature is a rock formation that seems to have been borrowed from Chinese landscape painting. Inside this will be a grotto containing a fountain that



spouts from between giant gilded hands. Presumably, the peep show of an island floating on a mirror to the sound of cheeping birds will not appear in the park. Still, there should be pleasure enough in wandering between the flower beds and dozing on the bench placed under a tree.



That leaves the visionaries, Lorna Jordan, the Jones-Ginzel team and Gary Simmons. Ms. Jordan would transform Paerdegat Basin, an inlet roughly a mile long that runs from Jamaica Bay to Canarsie. Her plans include installing a horseshoe-shaped magnet, which will act as an observa-

tion deck at the head of the inlet, grading the shoreline and adding a series of gardens planted on sloping islands. The degree to which her success depends on the Department of Environmental Protection's efforts to rehabilitate the Paerdegat Pumping Station and restore the surrounding

wetlands remains unclear.

Ms. Jones and Mr. Ginzel have their sights on a derelict pier hard by the Holland Tunnel — an area that narrowly escaped conversion during the Westway to-do. Their plan, produced in consultation with the Hudson River Park Conservancy, calls for separating the pier from the shore and adding at the far end a small mountain reached by two roads that undulate as if rehearsing for Coney Island.

Gary Simmons's project, "The Rosetta Garden," is an amphitheater filling a vacant lot between two houses in Brooklyn. The artist means the juxtaposition of rose bushes and grape vines with steps and columns made of concrete, is the artist's way of questioning a culture that attempts to discipline youth instead of promoting, as he puts it in a statement, "Bacchanalian celebration of culture and identity-making."

When it comes to observing the pieties, "Urban Paradise: Gardens in the City" doesn't miss a trick. But as an architectural and social beacon, it could use some help — perhaps from the homeless.

Between now and Oct. 29, the show's closing date, the gallery has scheduled several talks that promise to be enlightening. The number to call for information is (718) 960-8731. ■