

To Have and to Weld

Assessing the artistic influences of former Wall Streeter and Observer founder Arthur Carter

BY MARIO NAVES

"Plop Art," it's called: sculptures placed in public spaces with little thought given to how they might actually function in them.

"Plopping" this or that object in a highly trafficked area is presumably done for the benefit of the public weal, as if navigating around art is the same thing as appreciating it. The likelihood isn't out of the question, but most public art isn't public: It's just *there*, arbitrary and aloof.

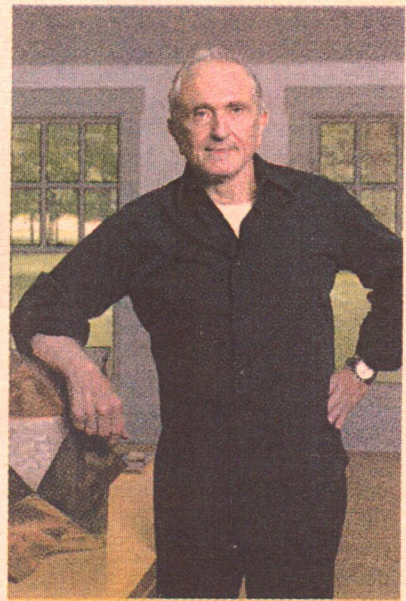
Writing about Arthur Carter's public art in the recently published monograph *Arthur Carter; Sculptures, Paintings, Drawings*, Peter Kaplan, former editor of *The Observer*, describes something different: sculptures that "speak to the sidewalk passers-by" and "commune with the air and light of the city." What he's positing is *social* sculpture: art that actively seeks to engage an audience and its environs. In a city as frenetic and preoccupied with itself as this one, that can seem a tall order. But Mr. Carter's stainless steel abstractions pull it off, "only occasionally yield[ing] to the laws and conventions" of Manhattan.

The son of an I.R.S. agent and a French teacher, Mr. Carter evinced little interest in art as a child. He was cultured, for sure—he displayed serious talent for classical piano—but Wall Street, not Julliard,

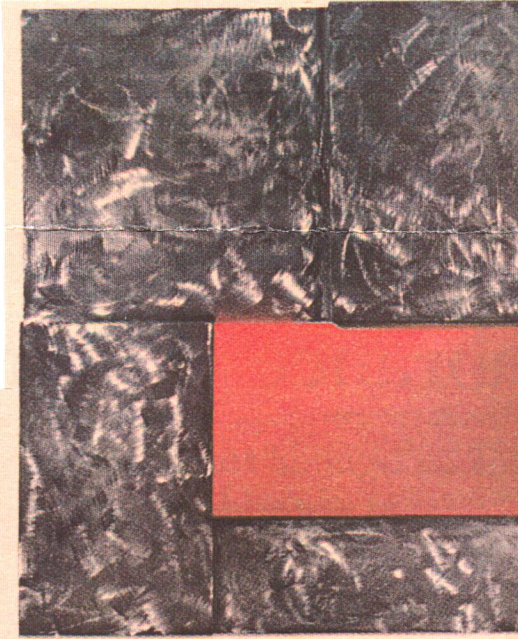
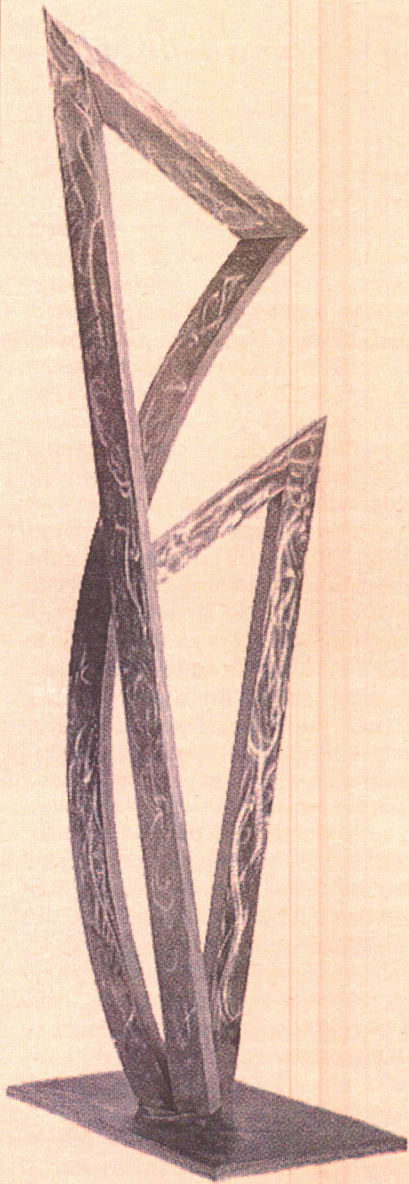
won out and in no small way. Mr. Kaplan describes Carter, Berlind and Weill, the investment-banking firm Mr. Carter founded, as "world beating" for a reason: It restructured the way in which business was done and, not coincidentally, was hugely successful. The term "power broker" could have been tailor-made for Mr. Carter.

Though he bought art—Maillol, Archipenko, Picasso and Braque are a few names in his collection—Mr. Carter showed little proclivity for art-making itself. Asked if someone were to foretell his future as an artist during the Wall Street years, Mr. Carter would have said "they were crazy." Instead, he turned to publishing, purchasing *The Nation* in 1985 and, two years later, founding *The Observer*. (He has since sold controlling interest in each publication.)

Art historian and journalist Charles A. Riley traces Mr. Carter's artistic development to his defining



Above: Carter. Below left: *An Arc Connected by Two Acute Angles*, 2008. Middle: *Orthogonal Construction*, 2009.



hand in shaping *The Observer*, including the choice of its distinctive salmon color. “Design battles,” Mr. Riley writes, “extracted aesthetics [Mr. Carter] could pursue in the studio, using compositional muscles, well toned from years” of publishing. Mr. Carter is a fan of Alexander

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Liberman, famed design director for Condé Nast and an artist of no mean consequence. It's no surprise: They not only shared a media background and a Connecticut neighborhood, but an aesthetic rooted in Constructivism, among the most rigorous of Modernist schools.

Mr. Carter has pursued art with the same inescapable drive he brought to business. His welded steel sculptures—with their sloping contours, lilting geometry, underplayed wit and machine-tooled surfaces—bring to mind any number of precedents: David Smith's totemic

effigies, Anthony Caro's stringent elisions of mass and void, Alexander Calder's effusive linearity and George Rickey's acrobatic equipoise. (Mr. Rickey's historical overview, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution*, is something akin to Mr. Carter's Bible.) His paintings evince a plainly stated and deeply considered debt to Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism.

But Mr. Carter knows that reiterating tradition isn't the same as enlivening and extending it. After completing a specific work, he'll scour the history books in order to trace its “evolution.” Mr. Carter does

so not only to establish a firm link to history, but as a means of keeping himself honest: He's loath to “infringe too closely” upon any single source. It seems an ass-backwards approach—shouldn't an artist make sure of these things before committing time, labor and resources?—but it points to the artist's heady confidence and, in the end, the work's streamlined authority justifies it.

The most telling link between the businessman and the artist is the clean efficiency of Mr. Carter's personal philosophy. “The simpler the economics are, the better. If you don't understand it, you don't do it.” This Koan-like declaration is as applicable to the studio as it is to the boardroom. Whether taking inspiration from the 13th-century mathematician Fibonacci, the *Tao Te Ching* or the Coast Guard—where, after all, he learned welding—Mr. Carter holds true to the notion that art, however distilled or abstract, is a celebration of life's complexity. His deeply unpretentious and optimistic vision brings, *pace* Mr. Kaplan, “order to the madness of the world”—which is, come to think of it, exactly what we should expect from an artist.

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