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Taking Art to the Streets

For Marjorie Kouns '79, art is something that lives beyond the walls of a gallery.

Story by Rachel Hatch

Several years ago, Marjorie Kouns '79 watched as a sunbeam crept out of her ground-floor, art-filled studio near New York City's Greenwich Village, where she has worked for years. "That shadow captured a moment," she says. "I envisioned it happening all over the city." Her vision led to a series of what she calls "Urban Sundials" — lines of color painted on New York City streets that outlined the shadows of some of her favorite buildings. Kouns didn't paint alone. She invited people from the buildings' neighborhoods, onlookers, and people passing by to help. "For a lot of the work I do, I would say having people engage in the process is essential to the art," she says.

This summer, Kouns took her love of outdoor art onto an even larger stage with a two-part project called "Well-Lit Chess Pieces" that adorns Washington Square Park until late September. In the four corners of the Greenwich Village park, she has placed 26 colorful, intricately designed shades over lampposts, as well as 11 large-scale chess pieces that stand behind the pondering chess players who regularly inhabit the park's southwest corner.



At an outdoor concert in July, oversized lampshades gave Washington Square Park the cozy ambience of a living room. (Photo by Anna Morris, ©2005, www.annashoots.com)

father.

Another element of Kouns' public art — an affection for the playfully surreal — is evident in a story she recalls from her freshman year at Illinois Wesleyan when she decided to turn her residence hall into a light show. "I convinced 90 women in Ferguson to turn on and off their light switches in sequence," she says, laughing at the memory. "I had to use a starter gun — the kind from track races — to coordinate it so they would know when to switch."

Kouns credits Illinois Wesleyan for giving her the foundation to turn her passion for art into a flourishing career.

"IWU was the perfect incubator for me to grow as an artist. My teachers were more like mentors. They understood the art world because they were in it," she says, adding that many of her former University

The whimsical work, which was funded with several public art grants, fulfills Kouns' dream of providing an artistic experience for the masses who pass daily through the park. "People will see these as they go to work or take a walk and it will alter their daily pattern, what they are used to seeing everyday."

Finding a project to match the scale and spirit of the lively, nine-and-half acre park — bustling in the warmer months with jugglers, university students, street musicians, skateboarders and bench warmers — was a major challenge. "Washington Square Park is known throughout the world, so I wanted to create a multidimensional work that would reflect the game of life in a way everyone could understand."

Kouns' affection for green, public places dates back to her childhood in Melrose Park, Ill. Her father's status as parks and recreation director for several Chicago suburbs meant that she had a parade of outdoor activities to choose from each summer — all free of charge, she adds with a chuckle. "Well-Lit Chess Pieces" is, in part, dedicated to Kouns'

professors — including Walter Thompson, Donna Page, and Ed McCulloch — supported her on the development of her Washington Square Park project. “They were like my cheerleaders,” says Kouns.

An internship with a sculptor in Chicago during her junior year whetted her appetite for more real-world experiences. “I came back to Illinois Wesleyan and felt like the Road Runner in a turtle race,” says Kouns. “I was spinning in alpha-artist mode to get everything done.”

Her senior year, she trekked east to see if the New York City art world fit her style. With the help of Illinois Wesleyan faculty, she landed a spot in a show at the Lincoln Center. “I knew then I was ready to jump off the springboard into the rest of my life,” says Kouns.

While based in New York City, she has often felt the desire to broaden her artist’s palette through travel. In 1985, she decided to move to Paris for a year after seeing an ad in the Village Voice for a 12th-century villa for rent. “Paris was a vibrant scene,” she says. “It’s amazing to immerse yourself in a culture and learn about it. It reflects in your art.” During her stay, she even outlined a Paris church, a prelude to her “Urban Sundials” work to come.

When she returned to New York, she renewed her interest in interactive art with work such as the continuing “Body as Canvas,” a provocative blend of dance, music, and art in which Kouns paints the bodies of participants as they move. “I love to use dancers,” she says. “I paint and they perform for a captive audience. It’s very visual.”

Another continuing work, “Made by Hand,” has traveled worldwide, including Beijing, where Kouns was artist-in-residency at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. A collection of handprints from women, the display was intended as a means of crossing language and cultural barriers. “Hands have had a universal symbolism since the beginning of time” she says. During the Beijing conference, Kouns invited women to take part in the installation by drawing their hands, signing their names and countries of origins, and hanging them with the hundreds of others she had collected. Wherever the display travels, an area is set aside for people who want to add their own handprints to the installation. Kouns enjoys observing the participants as they hunch over the worktables, “almost like children.”

No matter where she travels, it is New York’s Greenwich Village that she considers home — and her desire to decorate Washington Square Park reflects her fondness for that home. But the magnitude of her latest project also expresses a new scale of artistic ambition. “You really have to have a filmmaker’s mentality” to match that ambition, Kouns says. “You might think you can do it in a year, but then it takes five.”

As she learned in her earlier work on “Urban Sundials,” public art requires well-documented authorization through a host of bureaucratic entities, from the sanitation department to the community board. Seeking funding can require even more time and effort.

“How do you build a project like this? One meeting at a time,” says Kouns.



Kouns explores interactive art with her continuing “Body as Canvas” project in which she colorfully paints participants as they move to music. Above, dancer Marisa Maffia exhibits Kouns’ artistry in motion at New York City’s China Club. (Photo by Anna Morris, ©2005, www.annashoots.com)

“You need to learn how to deal with phones, faxes, e-mail, grant applications — and develop a real business acumen.” Partly, that means mastering “business speak,” she explains. “I learned when a ‘no’ means a ‘maybe,’ and how much money is really there where someone says ‘no money available.’”



Though exhausting or frustrating at times, what motivates Kouns throughout the process is the idea that her art is truly serving a community function. “I tried at first to make my work successful,” she reflects, “but I found when I gave up trying to make people notice my art — that’s when they took notice.

“When I began to realize what it is like to serve the community through art, that’s when it became a success.”

Helping people see their everyday world with a heightened sense is the essence of the artist’s mission, Kouns believes. “It’s all about altering someone’s perception, even if only for a while.” Seeing smiles on the faces of Washington Square Park patrons as they catch a glimpse of one of her lamps or chess pieces is all she needs to confirm that it was all worthwhile.

Oversized lampshades gave Washington Square Park the cozy ambience of a living room. A total of 26 of the festive shades were installed by Kouns and her helpers to cover the round, grimy lamps located at the park’s four entrances. (Photo by Anna Morris, ©2005, www.annashoots.com)