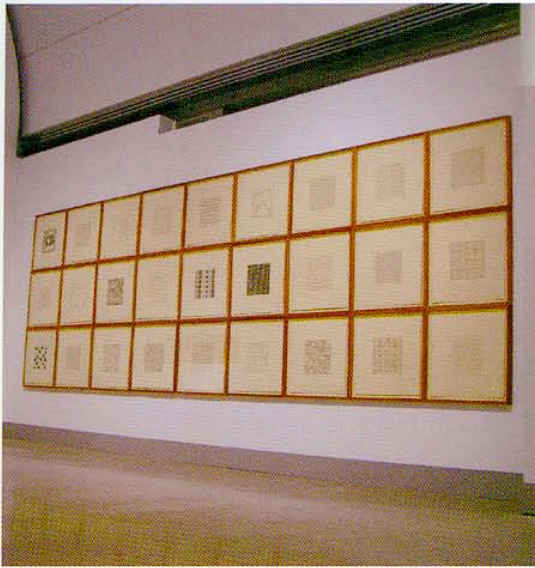


Radical Regionalism

Local Knowledge and Making Places

Vernon Ah Kee • John Citizen • Christos Dikeakos • Ann Kipling • Rosella Namok • Margaret Priest



Margaret Priest
Monument to Construction Workers, Construction Series
 1994
 installation view Museum London



aerial view of Cloud Park and *Monument to Construction Workers*, Toronto

91. Undated project and programme outline document from Margaret Priest files.

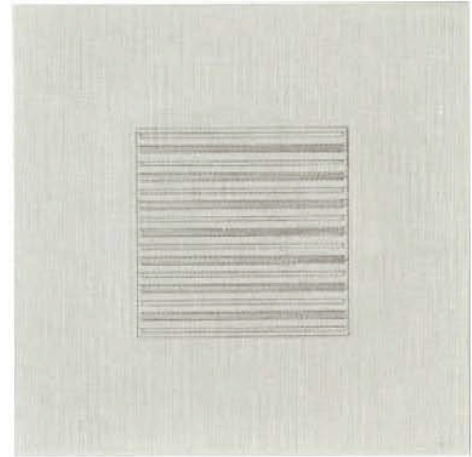
Margaret Priest

Margaret Priest's sense of identity was formed in a working-class background, growing up in post-WWII Dagenham, a borough of London, England. Although wartime austerity measures such as rationing continued into the 1950s, there was a sense of provisional optimism. One way in which it was made manifest was in a form of provincial modern architecture. Villages were transformed into new modern suburbs, and cities and suburbs enveloped historical communities and identities. (Priest's addendum texts are recollections of growing up, and what formed her consciousness.)

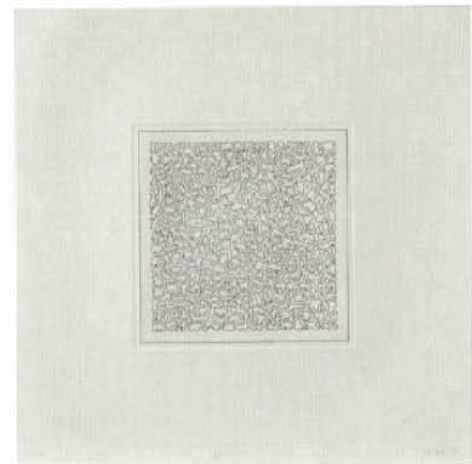
Her work has explored modernist architecture—beyond England—and for many years, she has worked primarily in drawings derived from extant architectural photography. The source photograph is always altered and transformed, as Priest negotiates a (private) settlement between modernity that she humanizes and a world that still requires the hand-built that is often made invisible. The *Monument to Construction Workers*, a permanent public-art commission at Bay and Adelaide streets in downtown Toronto, now called *Cloud Park*, was a critical turning point in her practice. Done in collaboration with Baird/Sampson Architects and completed in 1993, Priest's intention was to provide a constant and visible public reminder of the ongoing history of city-building by workers made anonymous. In revealing the "secret life" of buildings beneath the construction finish, the monument could also be "the skeleton of a ruin and the skeleton of a new construction [that would] not be assertive in ... narrative or symbolic content."⁹¹

The monument is comprised of 60 apertures with 50 panel inserts, each measuring approximately 150 x 150 cm, with an overall span of more than 26 metres. The panel designs produced by Priest were both a “sampler” of the various construction materials and an “essence” of the trade skill.⁹² For example, she determined that the “essence” of the *Zinc Roofing* panel was the metal fold, but Priest drew the edge of the fold: it becomes an abstraction. It is the same for other panels such as *Granite*, *Stainless Steel Pipes* and *Studded Sheet Metal*, and can be read as an inventory of minimalism in post-1950s art. In contrast, panels, such as *Terrazzo*, *Rubble Wall*, and *Brickwork*, are more readily identifiable (referential), even though the viewer may not be able to name some of the processes by which they are made. Others have a folksy, vernacular quality, such as *Bronze Pipes* and *Limestone*. Priest’s drawings were then fabricated by the respective trades people in consultation with their trade unions, another collaborative aspect.⁹³ In her programme description, Priest also emphasized that the wall would “serve as a reminder of the ebb and flow of the built city,” and, in conversation, said that her hope was for the work to seep into the world and the world to seep into the work. Priest also spoke of a “maternal quality,” that she “couldn’t stop nursing the monument as it provided for a rich manifestation of the process of creation.”⁹⁴ Her continuing interest in the process resulted in the suite of prints exhibited here, and includes a reproduction of the dedication panel; the wording reveals the social tissue, rather than memorializing individuals.⁹⁵

Lean Mix Concrete Panel is another example of “nursing.” Priest used the original monument drawing as a component for this variation, transformed into a repeat pattern (“tiling,” is a term adopted for computer-imaging processes) by rotating the original drawing. It was then printed on a large-scale vinyl sheet and allowed to curl when installed, as if it were fabric or a shower curtain, and then takes on a decorative pattern. The source drawing holds “a special place” in Priest’s thoughts and studio practice—the challenge of depicting something that had no inherent form and no intrinsic value. By



Margaret Priest
Zinc Roofing, from *Monument to Construction Workers*, *Construction Series* 1994



Margaret Priest
Rusticated Limestone, from *Monument to Construction Workers*, *Construction Series* 1994

92. Of the 50 panel inserts, 25 are neutral concrete panels, 24 are construction specimen panels and one is a dedication panel.

93. A trade-union culture aspect is examined in the Alan Filewod addendum text.

94. Conversation with the artist, April 2006.

95. The dedication panel text was written in collaboration with art critic Gary Michael Dault and John Cartwright of the Building Trades Union.

comparison, this may be the reverse of Kipling's drawing, where the challenge is to downplay the inherent form of trees on a hillside. The difference is that Priest's drawing is done over a longer and sustained period, producing drawings that are much smaller in scale. The necessity for both artists however, is observation and disciplined responses.

Vitrine with four concrete fragments is another hybridized visitation: the surfaces of four wedge-shaped sections of MDF (medium density fibreboard) are meticulously and studiously drawn to replicate a finished concrete surface and placed in a specially constructed metal and glass shelf unit. It is not a vitrine per se, and while it has a contemporary design, it is also minimal—practical—to protect the drawn-concrete elements and provide a rationalized place from which to view them. Like Dikeakos's valise, it exists within the vocabulary of museum display. If not regional-specific, Priest's work is a testament to "knowing" through "making." The monument has a place in the fabric of the city and is there for all its citizens.

The Artists

Vernon Ah Kee

John Citizen

Christos Dikeakos

Ann Kipling

Rosella Namok

Margaret Priest

Margaret Priest

I am a private, "studio" artist who has sustained an interest in the city and the built environment for nearly four decades. For many years my work remained on a very small scale, but, thanks to a climate that fosters an "expanded field" of vision, I have also engaged a realm of public art and the scale of the monumental. My interest and much of my thinking about architecture was formed and coloured by my upbringing in London, England, in the immediate post-war years. The Britain of the late 40s and 50s was a place of modernist utopian zeal and I am marked for life with a fervent belief in renewed possibilities.

I was infected with the spirit of militancy, or independence, as it was signalled by Thomas Thornycroft's mid-nineteenth century statue of Boudicca driving her armed chariot high above the Thames Embankment near the Houses of Parliament. I was infected with the spirit of modernism as it was communicated by Barbara Hepworth's abstract sculptural relief *Winged Figure* soaring above the pedestrians on the side of the new John Lewis department store (1960) on Oxford Street.

Boudicca (or Boadicea, the Warrior Queen as I knew her then) belonged to the overt nationalism of the British Empire but was for me a source of feminist pride, albeit before I could have put the thought into such terms. The Hepworth rose modernistically and optimistically, in tandem with the architecture, from the formerly blackened and charred war bombsite. Each of the works was made at a very particular moment in history and in response to a very particular cultural climate. Clearly, these early memories are tainted with sentimentality and jingoism, but nonetheless I was stirred by these two public monuments: one of a woman, one by a woman.

In my own practice I didn't want to make a public monument that registered as a discreet object in a field of architecture. Though paradoxically monumental in scale, I wished for a modest presence, and, through the delicacy of the intervention, the possibility of a sensitive and reflective integration into the site: one

that attempts to repair previous damage to the site while simultaneously retaining and transforming the traces of its existence. I wanted to fold the *Monument to Construction Workers* into the surrounding buildings, allowing the art to seep into the real world and the real world to seep into the art.

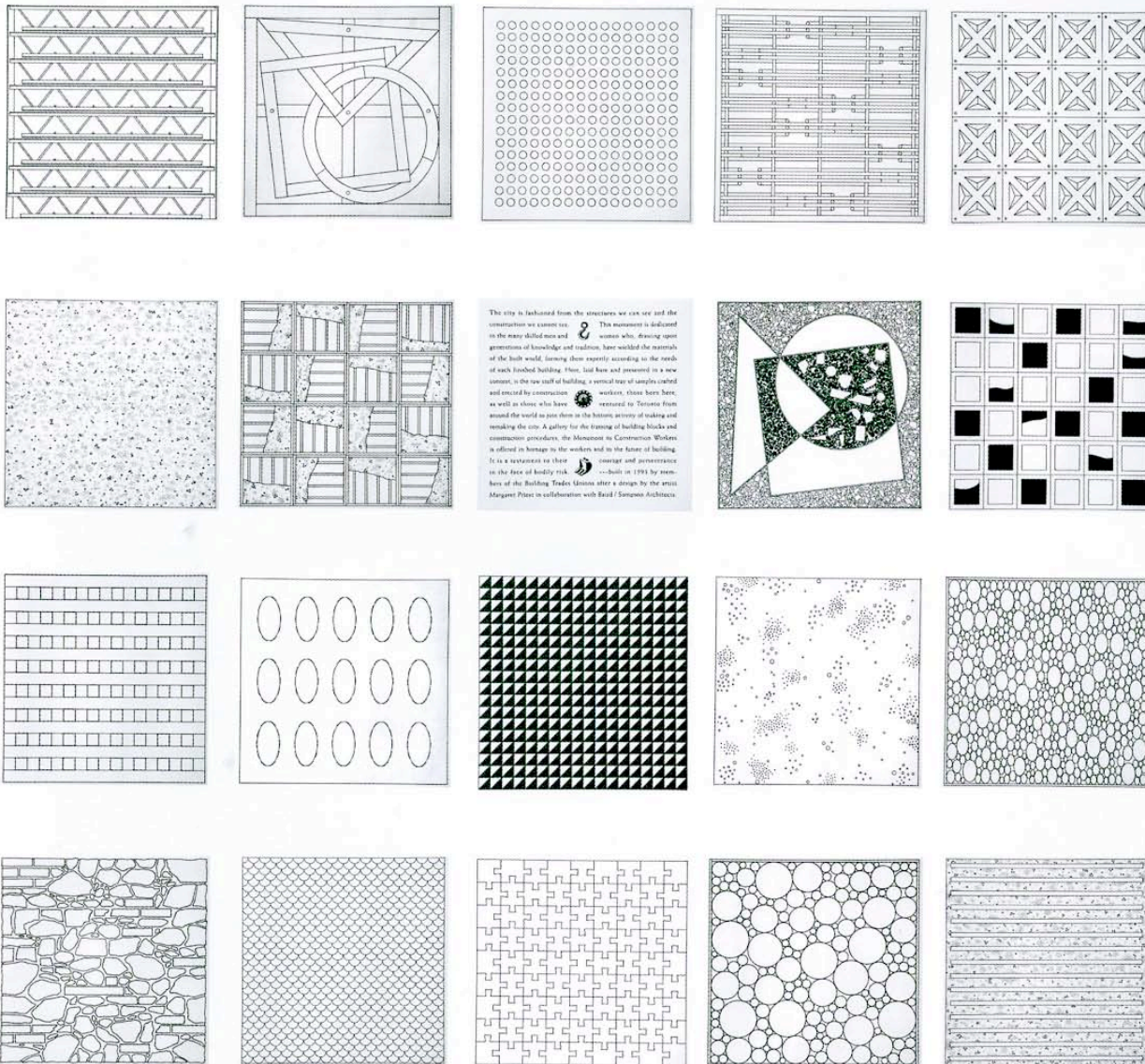
I wanted there to be no one focus, but rather the provision for a variety of circumstantial shifts that might provoke discovery and inherent possibilities of meaning.

The personal narratives of childhood are formed into a repository of—and for—survival. At times it is a glittering granite of coalesced memories, impressions, ideas and feelings that bolsters and supports, chisels and chips or—blocks and imprisons—thought, action and creativity. At other times it is a stew of their coagulation that survives the upheaval of puberty to nourish or poison the future.

SURVIVAL through MEMORY

It was 1948 and I was a small child living amid the darkness and deprivation that was post-war London. I was used to bombsites. But on one wintry grey weekday, from the top of a red double-decker bus, I glimpsed a bombed-out house beside a forlorn High Street: a house broken open to the sky and mostly fallen down to the ground. On a lone standing wall, a picture frame still hung. No picture survived, no other walls survived, no roof survived, only one floral-papered wall with an empty picture frame. Their signification survived for me to see then; the significance of their survival continues to this day.

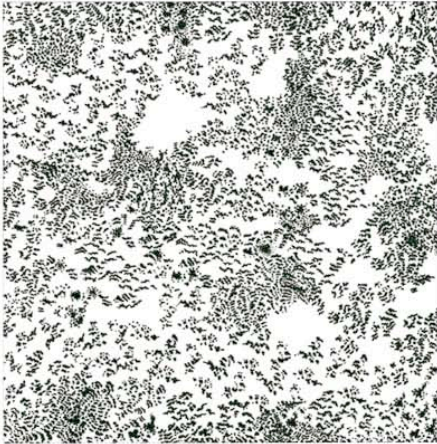
An earlier version of this text by Margaret Priest was commissioned by Atopia Projects, as part of the Advisory Board documents for *Atopia Journal* 4.33 urg/üleistu.



The city is fashioned from the structures we can see and the construction we cannot see. The monument is dedicated to the many skilled men and women who, drawing upon generations of knowledge and tradition, have worked the materials of the built world, forming them expertly according to the needs of each finished building. Their toil has and continues to be a new common, in the sea of all buildings, a vessel of unity, carried and shared by construction workers, those here, here, as well as those who have returned to Toronto from around the world to join them in the historic activity of making and rendering the city. A gallery for the tracing of building blocks and construction practices, the Monument to Construction Workers is offered in homage to the workers and to the future of building. It is a testament to their courage and perseverance in the face of bodily risk. ...built in 1993 by members of the Building Trades Unions after a design by the artist Margaret Priest in collaboration with Basil / Sansone Architects.

Margaret Priest

Left to right: Steel Trusswork; Rough Carpentry; Granite; Aluminum Conduit; Soldered Copper Sheet; Neutral Concrete Panel; Concrete Rebars; Dedication Panel; Terrazzo; Glazed Glass; Oak Grill; Welded Stainless Steel; Granite Tile; Studded Sheet Metal; Copper Pipes; Rubble Wall; Copper Shingles; Dovetailed Maple; Bronze Pipes; Formed Concrete from Monument to Construction Works, Construction Series 1994



Margaret Priest
Lean Mix Concrete Panel 2000 (right)
detail (above)



Margaret Priest
Vitrine with Four Concrete Fragments 2005-2006
detail (below)

A work of art is the residue of an event, and then—potentially—a mythic entity. Any work of art that makes its way out of the studio is a survivor. An enduring work of art is a survivor in the grand process of this natural selection. The raw stuff of creativity is made out of the remnants of continuance and cessation. Though abstract in its materiality, it is nonetheless a concrete substance: a coalescence of surviving memories and ideas formed into a solid state. Artificial and stone like, with its grains of mythic time past, pebbles of bright memory, shards of recollection and gravel of life's many hurts, it is as tangible and structural as its concrete counterpart in the built world.

Posing some questions about the cultural representation of work and workers

There is a locational irony surrounding Margaret Priest's *Monument to Construction Workers*: that such a tribute should be found in the middle of the densest concentration of capital in Canada, where corporate towers literally, concretely, look down on the presence of the worker.

That irony actually points to the conditions that make a monument to workers both feasible and perhaps necessary. The time has passed when the voice of labour could say that the living city itself is the monument to labour: "it is we who plowed the prairies/built the cities where they stand."¹ That kind of proletarian modernism didn't survive the Depression. But we can say that the towers of Bay Street are the monuments to the business culture that has reduced labour to "a special interest group," denying workers their monumental presence in the constructions they have built. Corporate culture has in that sense denaturalized labour, and evicted the worker from the work.

The fundamental paradox of represented work is that the process of work as making is understood to be present in work as product. In the process of working to build a representation of the work, the workers accept effacement as a condition of work. A monument to workers is a monument to the work they have done, and, by extension (or absence), to the material, industrial and ideological conditions which regulated the field of possibility in which it was done.

This work was designed by the artist and built by workers in the workplace; in the domain of labour but outside of the domain of work, the job. The worker is present here in a way that the soldier, for example, is not in the war memorial. But the presence is not physical; it is textual, coded into metaphors of craft and sweat: the textual values that survive the actual process of working and inform the final work.

War memorials are a text of absences; a monument to industrial workers is a text of erasures, presences that are effaced by the regulating economies of capital and trade unionism. In one sense, a monument to workers is a product of, and a monument to, the industrial organization of work and its separation of the worker and the creator. In this case, the monument is designed by an artist, whose domain of work embraces the creative organization of the aesthetic, and whose expertise embraces the crafts of the trade worker. On one level, this relation of artist to work reproduces the relationship of architect

and work; creative design and constructive labour are separated into spheres of class and power which are permeable from above but not from below. And of course, the more the artists transgress those boundaries, the harder they must struggle for legitimacy from the workers: the boundaries serve to protect class interest on both sides.

What interests me is the role of trade unions in this, as mediators of worker identity. It is the nature of monuments that they configure the mass into a single metonymic identity, even in the plural monuments that are constructed of lists of names, as in the Vietnam memorial in Washington. This anonymity is reinforced by the collectivity of trade unions. Historically, unions have claimed ownership of identity, regulating the definition of worker to participation in the industrial workplace, and negotiating accommodation with the structures of power. The right to creativity has traditionally been part of that negotiation, one that the worker, through the union, has largely surrendered in modern society. The surrender of creativity is the price of worker identity. The institutionalization of that surrender is literally built into the monument.

But the union itself is an ideological space, a social construct that renews itself through negotiation, containment and conflict between its various factions: left versus right; young versus old; shop floor versus local executive versus district hierarchy; local versus national and international leadership. These are the relations that defy monumentalism, which are not permitted—by the unions themselves—to be monumentalized. These are in fact the relations that constitute the union, externally and internally, as a vehicle of struggle. And that leads me to my real question: in this particular case, does the sculpture invite a reading of Fordist social balance, in which struggle is contained by regulation and accord, or does it invite a more resistant reading, in which the suppressed voices of struggle echo through the surrounding walls of capital?

Alan Filewod

Excerpted from an address presented at the session "The Cultural Work of Public Art," 30 January 1996. Part of the colloquium by the Centre for Cultural Studies/Centre d'études sur la culture at the University of Guelph, entitled *The Politics of Representation/Politique de la représentation*, 16 January to 7 February 1996.

1. *Solidarity Forever*. Lyric and music by Ralph Chaplin. 1915