

Frans and Marja de Boer Lichtveld: Two Commissions

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During the early 1980's, while researching and selecting works to be included in an exhibition entitled "The Art of Designed Environments in the Netherlands"¹ I became acquainted with Frans and Marja's work. In their atelier I saw projects in various stages of development. I admired their collaboration that combined innovative and challenging design with flawless technical perfection.

Solar Objects-Three in One

In Arkansas, as well as Indiana, the two states where Frans and Marja would place their commissioned work, no statewide programs to promote art in architecture existed, however, I was able to initiate art-in-architecture programs at both universities (The University of Arkansas at Little Rock and Indiana State University). Universities are learning environments and it proved to be a learning experience in several ways with the installation of **Solar Objects-Three in One**.

When the opportunity arose for art to be included in the new Engineering Technology building on the University of Arkansas at Little Rock campus, I selected Frans and Marja for the commission. I found in their manner of working collaboratively as a husband and wife team an example important for our students to see. The Little Rock architect, Joseph Johnson, did not have the experience of working directly with artists whereas Frans and Marja had a rich experiential history of successful collaboration with architects.

The major commissions produced by Frans and Marja, prior to **Solar Objects**, displayed a balance between individual artistic expression and applied design—the ability to adapt the design to the architectural context. That approach was critical for the Little Rock commission. I knew they would enjoy interacting with the campus and community. This provided an opportunity to introduce the campus to public art by international artists. Finally, they were able to create a design and deliver a sculpture that was within budget—important in university life.

The idea of acquiring a work by them following the percent for art model appealed to me and I suggested to Chancellor Jim Young that the Engineering Building, then under construction, would provide the perfect setting for the introduction of site-specific art by international artists. The design of the building was in keeping with the technological/engineering disciplines it would house. Frans and Marja enjoy the technical aspects of design and design execution that incorporated new technology and materials and it seemed appropriate to invite them to consider taking on the commission of a unique work of art for the interior of the building.

¹ Sponsored by IBM, The Netherlands and Stichting Kunst en Bedrijf

The commission provided multiple opportunities for collaboration. Since the building was still under construction, the primary architect, Joseph Johnson, invited them to see the building, evaluate the character of the interior environment, and create a site-specific work to be installed in the five-story high central atrium that contained a stairway. Characteristically, Frans and Marja carefully considered the architectural character of the space and the challenge of responding to it in a manner that would respect the style of the building and functionality of the stairway. They noted during their visit the roof was composed of tinted glass triangular panels and they included these shapes in their sculpture. Johnson wrote, “It is through their concern and understanding of this total environment that their sculpture will add a strong and positive energy to the architecture.”²

Frans and Marja returned home and set to work. They refined their concept through various design stages and developed a carefully constructed model showing the three **Solar Objects** to scale. Because the interior of the building is finished in industrial materials with variegated textures, Frans and Marja commented that their design was influenced in part by the shape of architectural elements and the industrial quality of materials used in the finishes.

When the sculpture arrived in Little Rock in a large crate (which Marja had decorated), facilities staff helped unpack the pieces and assist with the installation. Not familiar with contemporary art, the incredulous staff could not fathom what this was about and responded with their own unique humor. After days of preparing for the installation, coming to know the artists, and seeing the work in place in the building, all of them felt some pride and a sense of ownership in the work.³

The final design consisted of three asymmetrical pyramidal forms comprised of opaque and transparent shapes (some recalling the triangular roof shapes) attached to stainless steel poles. The poles were affixed to the wall and suspended by stainless steel cables. The impression created was one of kites soaring diagonally upward and downward in the atrium space. Frans and Marja anticipated their work would be seen from the top, five floors up, as well as the atrium below with different light sources, so they experimented with using transparent panes, panels with reflecting mirrors, sections painted in fluorescent paint and sand-blasted surfaces. The Plexiglas panels were suspended within the stainless steel forms thorough the use of small springs that tie the panels to the frames in such a way that would allow for expansion and contraction. At the opening ceremony, Mr. Aat van IJperen, Director of the Art and Industry Foundation in The Netherlands (Stichting Kunst and Bedrijf) remarked, “I am very pleased that art and science should meet in this new building,” and create a “state in which the material and cultural elements hold each other in perfect balance.

Shortly after the UALR installation, Frans and Marja completed the light sculpture “Zeppelins” installation in the atrium of the Medical Center in Groningen and a similar light sculpture in the

² Statement by A. Joseph Johnson, Jr., AIA December 2, 1986

³ Frans and Marja told how 12 workers gave up their weekend to help with the installation. After 18 hours of carrying up 275 kilos several flights of stairs, they had a perfect installation, the foreman had two broken ribs and the artists had 12 new friends.

WE International Building in Utrecht. The latter are both composed of “floating” tissue-skinned, illuminated geometric shapes. Geometric shapes work well in a public space.

I was also familiar with other projects the couple had recently completed prior to the UALR commission such as their work **Flying Home** in the atrium of the prison in Haarlem and the sculpture **Trinity** in the hall of an elementary school in Amsterdam. The prison work, set in an atrium, shows triangular shapes that rise assertively on a diagonal from the floor toward freedom suggested by the light from above. **Flying Home**, isolated in the atrium like a dream, provided the incarcerated an opportunity to soar imaginatively above the confines of the prison. The installation in the elementary school atrium, similar to the UALR work, shows three suspended triangular shapes made of Plexiglas with variegated surfaces that modulate the light entering from a central oculus. Like the UALR work, and later the installation at Indiana State University, it invites the viewer to experience the work by moving beneath it in a direction suggested by the piece. Doing so, the simple shapes take on an intricate complexity.

Three Elements

Twenty-one years after the installation of **Solar Objects** at UALR, Frans and Marja returned to the United States, this time to Terre Haute, Indiana, to install a sculptural work in the atrium of the College of Arts and Sciences on the Indiana State University campus. Although smaller than the earlier work, it utilizes some of the same elements such as Plexiglas and light elements—here neon. Like the UALR sculpture, the works attach to a wall. The UALR sculpture is characterized by a dynamism determined by diagonal alignment of the elements as they descend or rise in the atrium space in an engineering building. By contrast, **Three Elements** are less assertive in a baroque sense, but are classically still becoming objects for contemplation appropriate for a college of liberal arts. The simple forms gain in complexity as the observer moves through the atrium under the three pieces.

From the three elements, the circle, triangle and square forms, neon “sticks” extend toward each other and create a spatial center in the atrium.⁴ The forms are attached to the wall each with a unique linear extension into space created by the metal frames that define the basic shapes on the wall and, in a fugue-like manner, create their own complex geometric shapes in space. The initial basic shapes are partly covered with Plexiglas. Behind those planes is a smooth fabric covering illuminated with white light. The fabric covering is not placed flatly against the wall like a base but instead is transformed, in the case of the circle for example, into a 3-dimensional cone shape. Looking again at the circular shape, the metal framework that extends into space creates its own network of forms depending upon the viewpoint of the observer. The circle may look like an oval and the visually overlapping lines of the framework create, depending on the viewpoint, triangles, an oval or a diamond shape. It creates an engaging play of positive and negative shapes.

⁴ See also Bruno Munari, *Square, Circle, Triangle* first published in the early 1960’s. The simple forms also recall Bauhaus pedagogy. Kandinsky, in 1923, proposed a correspondence between the three elementary shapes (the dynamic triangle, static square and serene circle) and primary colors.

This commission presented a number of firsts for the artists. They designed the installation without actually seeing the space, but worked from blueprints for the atrium. From these they made a scale model of the space that enabled them to better visualize the spatial relationship of the art to the building. In contrast to the Arkansas work, the pieces were fabricated in Terre Haute by a local artist, Patrick Titzer, himself a sculptor. The artists and fabricator conferred via the web regularly. Long distance collaboration was something new, but it had the advantage of developing local interest in the work well before it was installed. It is typical of Frans and Marja, themselves collaborators, that this commission, like earlier ones, offered the opportunity to advance their own artistic language as well as experiment using new technology to arrive at new formal solutions.

It was a privilege to have had Frans and Marja work and interact on both campuses and to see them creatively respond to the challenges each project presented. Writing these brief reflections reminds me of the larger innovative oeuvre they produced together over the past few decades. Their work is of consistently high quality and reflects the serious way in which they advanced their own formal language—each piece a new evolutionary step. Thinking of their work reminded me of the intense passion-filled conversations we had as they would eagerly talk about new commissions, their conceptual designs and Frans would become quite animated as he described the anticipated challenging technical and fabrication aspects each project presented.

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